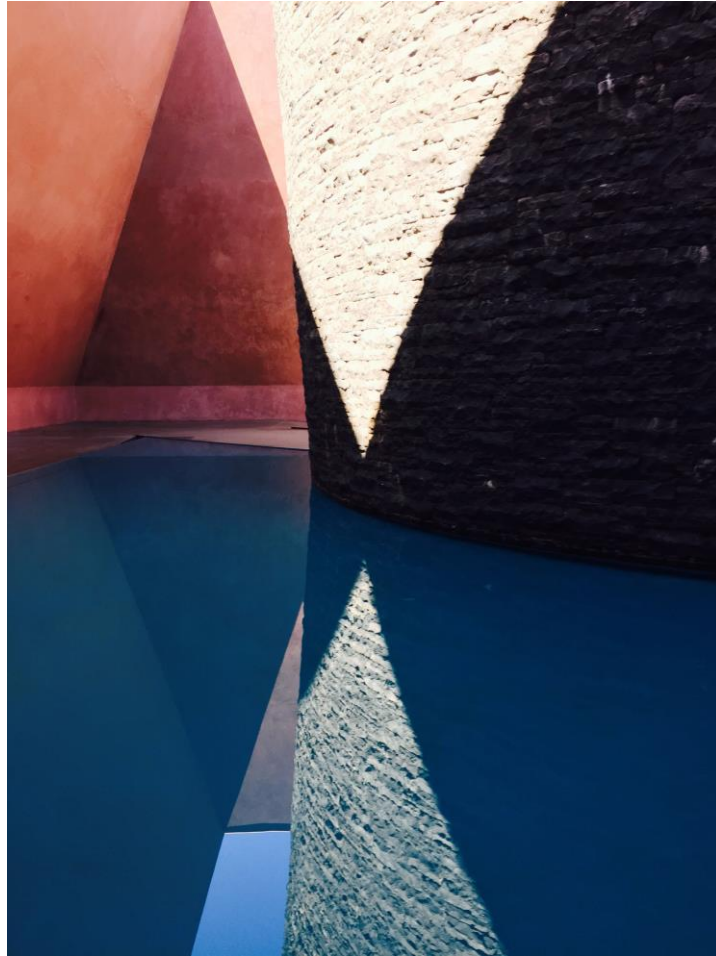


Meniscus



Volume 4

Issue 1

“Beyond the Divide”

Publication Information

Meniscus is published by the Australasian Association of Writing Programs
www.aawp.org.au

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ISSN: 2202-8862

Meniscus, an online literary journal featuring poetry and creative prose, is published twice a year. The editors read submissions twice a year; for details, please see www.meniscus.org.au.

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Images: “Within Without” by James Turrell, photographed by Paul Munden

About Meniscus

Meniscus is a literary journal, published and supported by the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) with editors from the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand.

The title of the journal was the result of a visit made by two of the editors to the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, where James Turrell’s extraordinary installation, “Within without” (2010), led them to think about how surfaces, curves, tension and openness interact. In particular, they were struck by the way in which the surface of the water features, and the uncertainty of the water’s containment, seems to analogue the excitement and anxiety inherent in creative practice, and the delicate balance between possibility and impossibility that is found in much good writing.

Australian Copyright Agency

Meniscus would like to acknowledge the generous support of the [Australian Copyright Agency’s Cultural Fund](#).

Foreword

This is a two-part issue of *Meniscus*, beginning with the Special Issue, “Beyond the Divide”, as conceived and edited by Dallas John Baker. It seems appropriate that this first special issue should relate so intriguingly to the James Turrell installation, “Within Without”, which inspired the title of this journal and continues to feature in a new photograph for the cover image of each issue.

Dallas John Baker highlights a particular East Coast divide in Australia, but we are pleased that the call for contributions resulted – as in past issues – with a considerable quantity of material from other parts of the world. At the same time, we also received an ongoing stream of general submissions, and this issue has accommodated a selection of those within its second part—a sort of “beyond the beyond”. Chris Kerr, a newcomer to Australia from the UK, has acted as guest editor on that section, further developing the British/Australasian editorial axis of the journal.

We are grateful to both guest editors for their work in compiling this issue.

Paul Munden and Gail Pittaway
Meniscus Editors

Guest Editors

Dallas J Baker

Dr Dallas J Baker is a lecturer in editing & publishing and creative writing in the School of Arts and Communication at the University of Southern Queensland. Dallas is Assistant Editor, Special Issues, of *Text: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses* and Managing Editor of *Polari Journal*. His study and research intersect with a number of disciplines: creative writing, publishing, media and cultural studies. Dallas is also a writer with creative work published in a number of journals and anthologies. www.dallasjohnbaker.com

Chris Kerr

Chris Kerr co-edited issue 62 of UK Poetry magazine *Magma* and edited a poetry pamphlet for Dead Ink. His poetry has been published in *Ambit*. He recently moved to Canberra from London.

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Editorial (1)

Why have a journal issue dedicated to writing and writers living and/or working on the other side of divides (geographical, political, linguistic or cultural)? The political answer to that question is that such issues address the current imbalance of opportunities between urban writers and writers living beyond the narrow East Coast strip that encompasses Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. There is also a cultural answer, which is that there are differences between writing that hails from outside of metropolitan areas, writing done on the margins of dominant cities or dominant cultures. These differences are complex and sometimes hard to put into words.

There is something about the experience of living or working in marginal and/or isolated places that gives these writers a unique tone and perspective. Not better, of course, just different; but different in a way that is valuable and worth celebrating. The most obvious difference is how a sense of place is used in writing from beyond divides, which is not only different from urban, dominant writing, but also somehow heightened. Regional writers tend to be self-conscious and deliberate in their use of place, deploying place as a strategy to displace or critique the centre, the dominant. Regional writers also use place to challenge the way marginal places and regions, their homes, are represented by those outside them, those in the urban metropolises.

The works gathered in this special edition of *Meniscus* deal with the experience of being on the other side of divides, of being outside of cultural centres, on the periphery of things. Sometimes they address this directly, sometimes indirectly, but always with a strong sense of place that displaces what would normally be considered the cultural and political centres.

The writing in “Beyond the Divide” is diverse in genre and theme. There is poetry, short fiction, creative nonfiction and collage, all of it set in, or produced by writers living in, rural or regional areas.

Taken together, these works constitute a discourse about regions. Frank Davey (1984) once wrote that regionalism was a discourse that represented a general social and/or political strategy for resisting meaning generated by others, particularly meaning about the regions generated by those outside of them, those in the centre, those in power. “Beyond the Divide” then can be seen as a *creative* strategy for resisting the way that places and people in remote or regional areas are represented and perceived by those in urban centres. It is also a way for writers living beyond divides to represent their homes and their lives for themselves.

Dallas John Baker

Works cited:

Davey, F 1984 ‘Towards the Ends of Regionalism’, in C Riegel and H Wylie (eds) *A Sense of Place: Re-Evaluating Regionalism in Canadian and American Writing*, Edmonton, Canada: The University of Alberta Press.

Cristina J. Baptista

Homesickness

At first, I imagined the coil of rope
my arms around my wife,
my mother;
braided hair whisked around my daughter's head.

It was remainders
of every person who could say
"love" in my language.
My *queridos* murmured low, carried by wind.

After two weeks, those coils fattened
into sleeping serpents.
Knotted eyes in the hold
waited for me to drift asleep.

Soon, nothing is enough.
Soon, everything has been sucked dry
and desiccated.

Who needs the flakes of cod?
Who needs the slim slivers of oakum
to pack into the cracks?

Everything is a small misery
when the only things you want
are beyond reach and, after six months,
beyond memory.

I would prefer the wind dies down, return my love;
the blankets
grow fatter.
I would prefer my dreams of home, and more
than just the dreams.

In the daylight, I keep my eyes open,
thank Deus
for tan skin that does not ripen
and peel like the red fruits of *Ianques*.

I take the rope and, for a moment,
do not do as I am told,

pretend not to understand. I take
my time, forget the devils prying. I cradle

the hemp gently—like holding a waist,
handling a child.

Eavesdroppers

These *Ianques*¹ name unholy things
after their holy book—
whale scraps become “bible leaves”
as if to sanctify the monster

as if this means salvation, too,
for what they call us,
as if we do not know:
the monster men,

eyes deep-set, brow bristling
with dry, black blood—
men
who cannot read

save the signs of hands,
the way light slivers and evaporates
at both ends of day
and the bodies of the dead.

Men who eavesdrop with bare feet
pressed against a battered stage,
memorising the feeling
of salted grain, burning a heel.

We wait and pretend.
Every word learned cleaves
open a new world,
a cutting-in with tongue.

¹ “Yankees” in Portuguese.

Zela Blissett, *et al.*

Floating Land, Noosa 2015

Zela Blissett, Donna Lee Brien, Susan Davis, Cheryl McGarron, Pam Miller, Irene Waters, Libby Woodhouse

Layered lavender curve
Ragged echoes swirl
Sunrise breaking.
Humble sphere spinning
Our ephemeral home.
Indistinct incantation of
Ethereal golden sunlight.
Spiral skies inflame
Tonal indigo articulation
Of rocks, birds and mountains.
Twisted twigs hewn bold
Reflected in the lake's murky depths.
This evocative spectacle
Explodes into ripples,
Again and again.

Dappling cloud
Green wings flash
Textures, mould
Rippling, tannic, turquoise lake –
Humble ripples.
Golden depths otherworldly arching.
Sunset rhythm erupts.
Golden mirrors reflecting
Balancing skies inflame.
Tranquil floating vernal ponds
Surreal surface shadows,
Again and again.

Jeremy Cornelius

In Eden

We were waiting to come up.

Quentin and I took shrooms with bread and peanut butter in the old woods about a mile from my trailer that October. It was dusk, and the sun was setting directly behind us. A white faint glimmer of the moon shone in the pink sky.

Quentin and his family were moving from Virginia to North Carolina the next week, and I knew I would never see him again. We were sixteen, and though I thought about kissing him whenever we were together, I always felt scared about how he would react, what he might do.

We decided to do shrooms as a “going away” thing. Neither of us had done it and had no idea what it felt like or how it would make us act. We had heard horror stories about experiences from people at school, who said it would make you go crazy, make you imagine your worst fears, like spiders crawling over your body. Someone told us that one person took them and thought their skin was orange peel and obsessively tried peeling it off. Quentin never really believed those stories. He said his brother had done shrooms before and that we’d be fine. I believed him. I always did.

I didn’t know who owned the woods, if anyone. We sat up in the dilapidated childhood treehouse my cousins and I built when I was about ten. We sat up there and took hits of pot from Quentin’s badly rolled joint. The old boards around us were rotting; the floorboards creaking with each step, it seemed like they could’ve collapsed at any point and left us tumbling down. The kid on our school bus, who sold us the shrooms, told us that pot would intensify the trip. We split the joint before stepping down the ladder made of two-by-fours nailed to the old oak tree.

Quentin turned toward me when we stepped onto the grass, and I kissed him standing right there. His eyes were wide afterward. He didn’t speak, but turned away toward the sunset.

I didn’t know if it was because we were high. I couldn’t remember if he had ever touched me before. I had been attracted to him since we met in middle school. He always seemed straight, so I would follow his lead when he talked about girls, but I was staring at him when he was staring at girls.

Being queer wasn’t something talked about in our area. I didn’t even know anyone else queer. I wasn’t even sure what to call myself. At that point, I just knew that I was attracted to Quentin. This would be my last chance to show him how I felt before he moved and I never saw him again. I had to do something. I wanted him to hold me.

After the kiss, I looked down to avoid Quentin’s eyes and saw our shadows on the ground. The shadow of the oak and our shadows lined up in a row on the tall, dappled grass, the sun setting behind us between two mountains making the shadows lengthen. I stared. The grass buzzed.

I could feel my spine tingling and eyes watering. I cried. I tried to sit against the trunk of the tree, but instead fell down against it, slamming my head against its rough bark. Quentin looked over, tears in his eyes and mine, and laughed. I smelled trees. I laughed and grabbed my head, checking for blood on my scalp. Quentin buzzed. My head buzzed, vibrating and quaking.

There were apples lying near us that had rolled down from an old apple tree at the top of a leaf-covered hill. Some were golden and full, but most were rotting, gnats swarming endlessly from one to another. Quentin couldn’t stop laughing. Laughing, laughing. Endlessly. At me. At my eyes. Why was he laughing? Was I laughing now?

I had kissed Quentin. He was still beside me. He didn't run away. Maybe he liked me too. Maybe we had just both assumed the other was straight.

The apples pulsated as I stared down at them, nearly splitting into two separate pieces. More tears welled up in my eyes, waiting to pour out. I tried to hold it in. Hold it all in, hold my feelings for Quentin tightly.

"Brandon, your eyes. They're going fucking crazy."

"No, yours are! They look like they're vibrating," I said.

We fell on the grass, laughing at each other.

"What should we do?"

"Go on a walk, maybe? First, let's just sit here for a few minutes."

He sat down next to me, laid his head on my shoulder. We sat in the dry leaves that whispered a little with the slow respiration of our waiting and with the slow breathing of the earth and the windy October. My dishevelled hair brushed up against his neck. He shivered at its touch. Goosebumps rose on his arm. Chills ran up and down my arms, legs and spine. I felt warmer than before, when we were in the treehouse. The soft lining of my sweater clung to my skin with nervous sweat.

The woods grew dark as the sun continued to set.

I was breathing heavily, and my chest felt like it was collapsing. I couldn't tell if it was from the pot or from being near Quentin. My head still throbbed, contracting and expanding every second. Contract and expand, back and forth, one then the other. Endlessly. My arm wrapped around Quentin's head on my shoulder. I scratched at his scalp, fingernails digging deeply. I kissed the crown of his head. His hair smelled comforting, like sheets dried on a clothesline. The scent of fresh air in every stitch. A sudden breeze chilled me. My spine tingled. It felt like a rush of cold air blowing through my back. It was interrupted: my stomach starting to churn. I couldn't tell if it was the shrooms or Quentin. I leaned forward. "I'm feeling sick," I said.

Quentin sat up quickly. "What's wrong?" he said.

I met his eyes for the first time since he couldn't stop laughing and crying. He stared down with widened shifting eyes, turning his head from left to right.

"I think they might have made me sick."

"We should get some water."

There was a creek a few feet below the oak tree. We ran over to it and scooped up handfuls of water and poured them into our mouths as if we'd been stranded without it for days. The water went down my throat, and I could feel it rushing through my body. Some of the water spilled down the front of my sweater, chilling my chest. Little tadpoles swimming away with each dip into the water. We kept chugging, one palm of water after another.

I sat back on the grass lining the creek bed and lay down, looking up at the disappearing daylight and the stars beginning to show as a faint glimmer of the moon came out directly above me. Quentin, now sitting on the slope going down to the water, looked down at me. "Are you feeling okay?" he asked, gently smiling.

"I feel a little better. Yeah," I said.

"Do you wanna lay down here for a little longer?" he asked.

"We should maybe start heading back to my house before it gets too dark," I replied.

"That's a good idea. Are your mom and dad home?"

"No, they don't get home from work for another few hours."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Alright. Good. I don't know if I could even look at your parents after this."

"After what?"

"The shrooms. What did you think I meant?"

"That's what I thought. I just thought maybe you meant something else."

"Like what?"

I shuddered. And waited, looking from Quentin's eyes up to the forming stars.

"Well, our kiss."

"What?"

I wondered if he'd forgotten about it already. I teared up. My entire body quivered on the grass. My chest clenched tightly. My breath sped up. I told myself to calm down, to breathe slowly. I was never going to see him again. This was it. Breathe slowly.

"Our kiss," I said again, "we kissed each other after we got down from the tree. Remember?"

"What about it?"

I didn't reply. He kept staring down at me, waiting for a reply. My eyes were on the stars appearing in the sky, the thickening moon. I stared straight up into that sky, not caring at that moment what Quentin's eyes were staring at and who he was in love with.

"Come on, what? You kissed me, you know," Quentin said.

I knew I had, and I meant something by it. I loved Quentin. I knew that. There was nothing clearer to me at that moment; but I couldn't tell him. I knew what violent things happened to men who liked men. I still hadn't answered his question, was still looking up at the stars, head buzzing, smelling the trees.

"Well," he said, standing quietly, looming over me, "I'm going to walk back to your house before the sun is down, if you want to come with me."

"Sure," I said.

I pushed myself up and off the grass and looked around. There was mud on my feet. There was green in the air. The apples were golden. Teardrops ran down my cheekbones. I could feel them streaming down from my eyelids onto my cheeks, warm at first and then cooler and cooler the further they went. Quentin and I were walking next to each other. I put my thumb and index finger under my chin and subtly wiped away a tear. I put my hand by my side. I wanted to feel his hand in mine, to clench it tightly and tell him how much I loved him.

Quentin headed back through the woods, stomping on the grass as he moved ahead of me. I stayed a few feet behind him at first, not knowing what I should say to him or how to make our friendship good again, not knowing how exactly to tell him I wanted him to be more than that, not knowing what I would say to his face the next time I looked into his eyes.

Everything was still buzzing. The trees were buzzing. The grass was buzzing. Quentin was buzzing. I felt vibration after vibration after vibration. I stopped mid-step before the edge of the woods. My naked feet clenched the grass, each blade between my toes tickling my skin as I tensed my entire foot and then relaxed it into the grass.

I looked up from my feet. Quentin had disappeared. The dark woods stood before me, yellow leaves falling to grace the ground. I entered the woods, my feet falling as softly as the leaves were falling around me. Then I heard leaves crunching ahead of me, then to the left.

"Quentin?" I asked, "Is that you?"

I looked up and saw a hunter's tree-stand barely visible above me. The sun had set. The air had cooled down considerably, chilling my water-soaked sweater, chilling my back and my mud-covered toes even more. Everything looked bleakly pale and yellow because of the full moon, growing dimmer with every passing second. Seeing the raindrops on the tree limbs glisten from the moonlight sent waves down my spine, like tingling icicles sticking to each segment and shattering when I moved. My body tingled as I walked through the woods.

Quentin must be playing a prank on me, I thought; I hoped. Leaves stirred and crunched all around me. The yellow in the sky was diminishing quickly as clouds crossed in front of the moon.

"Gotcha!" Quentin yelled as he jumped out from behind the tree. I screamed and bent double, putting my hands on my knees and staring into the buzzing belly of my barely visible shadow on the ground. "You think you're so funny, don't you?" I said, feeling sick again, looking

up and meeting Quentin's vibrating eyes looking down, laughing at me. I rose up, tears welling up. My back tingled as I lifted myself upright. I stared at him with swollen eyes.

"Why did you do that, you asshole?" I rushed at him, our eyes locked, put my hands on his chest. His overalls were soaked from the creek, like my sweater.

"It was only a joke, dude," he said.

I looked into his soft, glassy eyes, wanting to lean in and kiss him again. "Fuck you," I said as I pushed him away from me. He stumbled back, stepping on a hard yellow apple, tumbling backwards. I watched him fall, heard the crack as his head slammed against the bottom of the ladder for the tree-stand. He quickly jerked forward, grabbing the back of his skull. His shape dizzily wobbled and distorted in my eyes. He shook his head, shaking off the blow at first, then fell down to his knees. I stood there, looking down at him curled in a ball, rolling on the wet leaves that stuck to the back of his overalls with each turn on the ground.

My spine tingled, my eyes watered.

Spotches of red were on the yellow leaves next to Quentin. He started to softly whimper, not saying a word. I leaned down next to him and grabbed his head to take a look at the wound.

"Stop!" he yelled.

"I'm trying to see how bad it is. Hold still," I replied. There was a gash on the back of his head. Blood and dirt were matted in his hair along with tiny bits of crushed yellow leaves. Light shone through the trees onto us.

I kept thinking he was going to die that night. His face was barely visible at that point; just the shadow of Quentin's eyes, two glassy marbles, stared back at me. I put my arm under his back to sit him up. He was bigger and taller than me, and I had always been weak myself. He was breathing too fast.

"Slow your breathing," I said.

The wind suddenly blew, tickling my neck, tingling my spine, then a drop of water fell on my nose, running off and splashing onto Quentin's cheek. I wrapped my arms around him and could feel the cold clasp on his overalls against me. I didn't know who to run to, or where to go. Quentin was buzzing. My body was vibrating. His breath slowed down as he began to inhale and exhale more deeply.

"Are you alright?" I asked.

"My head keeps throbbing."

I wondered if it was Quentin or the shrooms. I thought he was dying. I thought about running for help. My house was about a mile away, and the nearest neighbour was about four or five. No way I could carry Quentin that far, especially not now, not after all the shrooms, the pot. I looked back at the wound. The bleeding seemed to have slowed, but I couldn't keep from thinking about concussions and seizures.

This wasn't right.

My eyes started to throb. I pulled back from Quentin and propped him up against the tree.

"We should clean that soon. Can you walk?" I nervously asked.

"I think so, but not far."

He looked like he was going into a doze, and I remembered hearing not to let anyone fall asleep after something like this. The wind and leaves had stilled. It wasn't raining anymore. I got up to grab a handful of water for Quentin from the creek. He grabbed my leg.

"Don't leave me," he said. Tears welled up in my eyes.

"I won't," I replied, "We should walk back to my house, though. Are you good to walk if I help you?"

"Yeah," he said.

I pulled him up as best I could. He put his arm around my shoulder. The yellow leaves lost their hue. The trees kept buzzing. I looked over at Quentin. His eyes were flickering in and out. He can't die. He won't. We stumbled down the leaf-covered, pine-cone lined trail.

“You can do it, just keep moving,” I said.

He didn’t respond, but his eyes were open when I looked over at him. “Just a little further,” I assured him. Our breathing matched: the same pace, the same pattern, the same timing. The trail seemed never-ending, dimly lit by the moon, and empty. Crickets and owls started in with their songs. Even the darkness seemed to vibrate. I could see the grey wooden fence that lined my backyard up ahead.

“Almost there,” I told Quentin, dragging him at that point.

“Let me sit down,” he said.

“We’re almost to my house, though,” I replied.

“I know, but for just two seconds.”

He sat down on the grass, his long shadow visible from the bright fog light at the back of my house. I stepped onto his shadow and crouched down in front of him.

“How is your head?” I asked.

“It’s fine,” he gruffly replied with tears in his eyes.

I still thought he was dying.

“I’m going to run inside and grab you a glass of water. Alright? Don’t lie down, don’t fall asleep.”

No response. I sprinted up to my trailer and quickly opened the cabinet to grab a glass, knocking down one that was beside the sink. It shattered on the floor.

“Shit!” I yelled to no one. I grabbed the broom and dustpan, cleaning as quickly as I could. Quentin was waiting for me, still sitting on the grass, facing the woods and the hill we’d been sitting on. I filled a glass with water, then grabbed a small clean dishrag to make an ice pack; but I’d missed a piece of glass, and stepped on it, slicing the heel of my muddy foot open.

I ran into the laundry room next to the kitchen, searched through the medicine cabinet and grabbed a sanitary wipe and Neosporin cream. I applied the cream and cleaned my foot up. It throbbed as I limped out of the back screen door, a tiny trail of blood drops behind me on the linoleum floor. The door slammed behind me. I looked out from the back deck and saw Quentin lying on the grass. Startled, I ran to him as quickly as I could, and slid down on the wet grass.

I put my hands on his face and started crying.

“Fuck! What’s wrong?” he quickly sat up and asked.

“I thought you were dead,” I said.

“I’m fine. Jesus Christ.”

I tried to hug him again, but he pushed me off, glaring. I restrained myself and my tears. I sat down beside him and drank from the half-full glass of water. I set the rag and ice down beside him.

“I brought you some stuff for your head,” I told him.

No response. My eyes throbbed. I didn’t know if it was Quentin or the shrooms.

We sat there for about an hour in silence until we came down from the shrooms. I saw my dad’s truck driving up the hill on the long gravel driveway. I would have to cover my cut to keep it from bleeding. My foot throbbed.

“I’m gonna go clean up quickly. There’s still some blood on the floor, and I want to make sure I got all of the glass,” I said. “Are you alright?”

“Sure,” he mumbled.

I walked back to the house and quickly wiped the blood drops off the floor.

“What the hell happened?” my dad asked as he set his lunchbox on the counter.

“Sorry, we were walking around in the woods and Quentin hit his head. I came to get him water and medicine.”

“Alright. Is his head alright?”

“I think it’s throbbing.”

“Have you been crying?”

“I just panicked when he hit his head.”

“How did he hurt it?”

“On the tree-stand down in the wood next to the creek.”

“What were you guys doing all the way down there?”

“We were in my old treehouse, hanging out.”

Quentin stumbled in the front door. “Do you have any Tylenol?” he asked. “My head is pounding like hell. Oh, hi. Sorry, I hit —”

“Brandon told me. I’ll go grab some for you,” my dad said and went into the bathroom.

My head was buzzing. I leaned over and cleaned up the glass, feeling like I was going to be sick again. My feet were caked in mud. Yellow leaves clung to Quentin’s overalls.

“Sorry about, you know,” I said.

“About what?” he responded.

“Pushing you, I guess.”

“Yeah. It’s fine. My head is just buzzing like crazy.”

“Yeah, mine too.”

“Do my eyes still look weird? I don’t want your dad to suspect anything.”

“They look fine; watery, but not weird, just watery.”

“Good.”

My dad came back in with a bottle of pills in his hand. “Let’s get you some ice for that too. Let me take a look,” my dad said. “Oh, yeah, you got a pretty nasty gash. It should be alright, though. It’s stopped bleeding. Take two of these to stop the throbbing.” My dad filled up a glass with water and handed him two pills.

“Thanks,” Quentin said.

Our eyes met, a tear went down his cheek as he downed the glass of water. I walked toward my room and whispered “I love you” on the way out of the room.

Quentin slept on the couch at my house that night and was gone by the time I woke in the morning. A wet rag soaked with melted ice and a few tiny blood stains sat on the floor. I limped into the kitchen, nervously avoiding the area where I dropped the glass. I looked at the woods and the hill from the window above the sink, the grass and golden apples. Yellow leaves were blowing in circles in the front yard. My head was buzzing. I remembered the cold clasps on Quentin’s overalls, my lips against his beneath the oak tree.

He was moving to North Carolina in a couple of weeks. I saw him the following Monday in the hall at school. He didn’t look me in the eye when I said hey to him. I didn’t expect him to, not after that night. I wanted to write to him before he moved, to tell him how much I loved him, how I still wanted to walk with him in the woods, grip his hand tightly, go back up to my treehouse.

My head throbbed, buzzed, my back went cold, my spine tingled. It still does when I think of Quentin. I still want him to hold me.

Barbara De Franceschi

How come

I love like a flowering weed
win without losing
get drunker than drunk on the blush of wild hops
create my own clichés
slop in winter frost to warm my toes
smell rain days before a drop drizzles
sing as though every bastard is listening
dribble chocolate onto my pillow
sleep with dreams in free fall

I live
with an ochre desert
pressed against my skin.

Arid Zone

The desert is slow.
It speaks to me in a saltbush dialect
I know so well.

Ant trails slacken.
Lizards eat the shadows cast by strewn stone,
crows pitch their squawks to the pulse of ancient songlines,
flies create their own postcode around squinted eyes.
Dry heat condenses into an ecosystem puffed
and wheezing. I am not dead – just melting.
Jeans stick to my legs like a dingo pup to its alpha mother,
moods spin on a wilderness maelstrom.
Days flare in brazen colours.
Skinny clouds smile.
A mirage shimmies across alluvial fans
in a ceremonial dance with emu and kangaroo,
I whisper my secrets to infinite plains
that yawn in drowsy resignation.
Grief and happiness are splintered
in the nuptials between self and place.
I choose fidelity inside a cicada's call,
lean to the south winds mimicking siroccos
for dust-laden warmth.
There are no delusions,
no urge to climb distant ranges
or etch my words onto sandstone boulders
where wild goats romp
amongst the weed-blown undertow.

Why do I live here you might ask
if the earth is parched,
and the soul is stripped naked
in the puckers of every sunset.

If you have never been to this place –
you will not understand.

Kevin Doyle

Capricorn

Peader Hallisey looked along the shimmering streak of black bitumen and pulled onto the Northern Highway. The road was quiet and he headed south, the sun behind him at last. After a mile or so he pulled over, onto the hard shoulder and coasted slowly. Scanning the desert he finally saw the rock, peering over a clump of bottlebrush; in the intense sunlight it almost glowed.

He applied the brakes, the truck skidded to a halt on the dusty verge. He left the engine to idle and got out into the bright sunshine; it was like stepping into an oven. Looking around he saw dots of parched spinifex grass spreading across the plain of red sand. Further away there was a cluster of hills and beyond these, near the dry river bed, a deep gash in the hillside.

Eighteen years earlier Hallisey had been shown this place by an elder of the Banjima tribe, a man named Thomas Bass. He had trekked with Bass for almost a month through the wilderness of the Pilbara avoiding the big mining towns of Newman and Marble Bar. Bass had shown him the aboriginal landscape and explained that it was custom to ask permission of the ancestors whenever one crossed the boundaries onto their lands – boundaries that were not marked on any map of Western Australia but were there nonetheless.

Hallisey stepped forward now and shouted clearly, “I ask the permission of the ancestors to pass through these lands of the Banjima people.”

His statement was met by a pervading silence. Even so Hallisey remained a moment listening, until a long road-train passed him on the opposite side of the highway, its after-draft pummelling him and his vehicle.

Climbing back into the truck’s cabin, he closed the door and cooled in the air-conditioning. A short while later he was back on the road; he had about thirty miles to go.

A week earlier Hallisey had been out delivering supplies for the Shire in the lands around Jigalong, not far from the rabbit-proof fence. He had come home from the long drive to find the light blinking on his answering machine – a rare occurrence. He pressed the button to listen. It was a voice from a long time ago. The Cork accent was strong and gravelly; the tone slightly jubilant. It was Tony Barrington. He began, *I was in Dublin yesterday...* The message explained about a report that had just come out in Ireland about the industrial schools and what had gone on in them. Hallisey listened to the entirety of the long message. He didn’t really know what to make of its suddenness. Here, so far away, he hardly knew anything anymore about what was happening in the world, let alone back in Ireland.

He showered, listened to the message again and then went out onto his veranda to watch the sun set – something he did most evenings. Later, before going to bed, he listened to the message again. This time he took down the details.

He saw the Capricorn Roadhouse ahead, on a wide clearing; a tar-side oasis – a place to get petrol, stretch legs and take a shower. It was the nearest settlement of any size to Hallisey, who lived by choice in the remote outback. The current manager, a Torres Strait Islander by the name of Lance Cooper, was a good friend of his. Earlier he had phoned Cooper to tell him that he was on his way in.

Pulling off the highway Hallisey drove slowly up the unsealed track that led to the forecourt, stopping as near as he could to the ugly white awning that afforded generous shade. Switching off the engine, he collected his cigarettes and got out. Again he felt the blast of dry heat.

Lighting up, he took a long deep draw. Civilisation? Certainly it was the largest human conurbation for a hundred miles in any direction. And it was busy today: a large campervan parked at the pumps, lines of road-trains parallel-parked in the truckers' compound. Near him a Landrover was being kitted out for serious off-road driving. Jerry cans marked "Drinking Water" were neatly lashed to the sides and on the roof Hallisey spied one of the new GPS dishes that he'd heard the Shire workers talking about. He saluted the driver casually and she smiled at him.

Finishing his cigarette he stamped on the butt and entered the roadhouse. "Aaah," he said to the immediate effect of the air-conditioning. It felt glorious – one of the great inventions, he believed. He felt like raising his arms up high to let the air in, but didn't.

Cooper had new posters up about the Freemantle Dockers – the AFL footie team from down Perth way that Cooper adored. They were having another bad season – Hallisey would point that out to him.

He was hailed from behind the counter. "Okay mate," said Hallisey returning the wave. He indicated that he was fine to hang about for a while.

At the self-service coffee machine he made himself a cup of black coffee using three espresso shots. Taking a seat by the window he watched the goings on out in the forecourt. It was tough driving territory and anyone who was here at the Capricorn was happy to take their time before hitting the long road once more.

He drank his coffee and examined a slip of paper that he had taken from his breast pocket. There was an address on the paper – not that it looked like an address. "Address" was the term Barrington had used in his phone message. Hallisey had faithfully recorded each letter and number of this "address" which Barrington had said he should take to an internet café. Cooper was Hallisey's internet café.

"That's three cups of coffee you had there," said his friend when he finally came over. "Don't think that I didn't see what you did. You'll have to pay for all three."

"Put it on my tab," said Hallisey.

"Your tab is closed."

They both smiled and Cooper put his hand out to clasp Hallisey's in welcome. "So what brings you to town Irishman?"

Hallisey handed him the slip of paper. "Does that make any sense to you? Seems I can listen to it."

"So the internet has caught up with you at last old man. Where did you get this from?"

"A friend from way back. Phoned me up with it. Said I could listen to it?"

Cooper scrutinised the slip. "It's an audio file okay. Podcasts they're called. Something from the radio most likely." He paused. "Though occasionally it can be phone sex stuff too."

"That's most likely it," grinned Hallisey.

"I figured."

Cooper set up Hallisey on the computer in the back office. He helped him type in the internet address but they made an error and nothing happened. They checked it and made one correction. On the second attempt it loaded.

"Play, pause, stop," said Cooper showing Hallisey with the mouse which icon was which. "Just like in the old tape decks," he added with a guffaw and thumped the Irishman's shoulder.

Hallisey was left alone. He waited. There was intro music and an announcement. The programme was called "Liveline" and the presenter was talking to people on a march in Dublin. It was called the "March of Solidarity" and a woman explained that she had come all the way from the States to be there, in Dublin, at the march. Hallisey then heard a man being interviewed. He told his story in a plain, unemotional voice. He was abused at an industrial school he was sent to while preparing for his first Holy Communion.

Hallisey paused the recording. The noise and chatter from the counter outside receded and he felt his heart thump. After waiting a moment he clicked the play button again. The next person interviewed, another man, was much more edgy and angry. As he spoke, there was

shouting and cheering in the background from the march. There were more interviews and then Hallisey recognised his friend. Barrington began strongly but his voice grew quieter as he went on. He told about their school in Cork – Greenmount Industrial School. He said it out: what had happened to him there, the exact details. Hallisey hardly heard anything from that point on.

In forty-three years Hallisey had been back to Ireland only once – in 1991. That time he had stayed with his sister – she was now dead. He went by the old place where he had lived. Then he made one effort to walk out to Greenmount School but didn't make it. Instead he caught the bus and went up to Galway. He wanted to see the beautiful Ireland that they all talked about in Australia. He didn't go back to Cork.

After he returned to Australia, something had changed for Hallisey. The outback was different. Just as Ireland was more than what it appeared as on the surface, so too was Australia.

Soon after Hallisey moved out of Perth permanently and got work up north in the Pilbara at one of the mines. But it wasn't what he wanted to do. He took a variety of jobs after that – as a shearer, as a handyman and later as a farm mechanic. It was during those years, traipsing back and forth across the Pilbara, that he learned about the true history of the area and the different people who lived there – the Banjima, Yinjibarndi, Birrimaya, Ngaluma, Jaburara.

He gravitated deeper into outback; the remoteness and solitude drew him.

Cooper came in with a coffee. He saw the Irishman staring into space. There were tear streaks on his dusty brown face and the computer was silent. He put his hand on Hallisey's shoulder and left it there. Hallisey put his hand up onto his friend's to acknowledge it.

"I guess it's not phone sex then."

"No."

A while later Hallisey finished with the podcast. He got up, went out to the café and took his seat again by the window.

Cooper came over eventually. "It's on the house, what do you want?"

"A can of your coldest Solo."

Cooper returned with the lemonade drink and a straw. He explained, "I got you the straw because you're such a baby."

Hallisey didn't respond. He looked down, pulled the tab and took a long slug from the can.

"Why don't you hang about?" said Cooper. "When Jenny comes on later we can take off and have a beer. Wouldn't that be an idea?"

"I might just do that," said Hallisey.

He went outside, this time to the back of the roadhouse to where the well-known tourist attraction was. A metal rail like a single train track had been embedded long-ways in the red earth. The rail was polished from people walking on it and it glinted in the sunshine. A sign nearby said *This Is The Tropic Of Capricorn*.

Hallisey went and leaned against the sign. He was glad now of the hot sun. Staring out over the flat red outback, he thought about Barrington. He recalled an event a long time ago. He was sitting with his friend on the bank of the Lee, just under the Shaky Bridge. It was one of those times when they had run away from Greenmount. They were looking at the slow moving, silent flow of water. Suddenly Barrington began rocking back and forth the way a child might. His head was buried in his knees which he was clasping tightly into himself and he was crying. He wouldn't say what was wrong.

Hallisey had never known exactly what had happened to his friend until now. He had guessed of course, had guessed it was like what had happened to him. But it was never spoken of between them. Instead there had always been just this bond, a bond that allowed a postcard and an odd letter to float between them across the continents over the decades.

The odd thing was, Hallisey thought now, he envied Barrington. In some way, he felt, his friend had freed himself. By saying it out on the radio, in detail, about what had happened to him, wasn't that what he had done? And wasn't it something? Hallisey had never told anyone.

Phillip Hall

Cactus

That first night in the Eco House
– bird song and wind leafing through canopy –
in the tree top room at Darwin’s
George Brown Botanical Gardens
with the megapods scratch-tumbling the rot.

I stood at the screened black-louvered windows
and beneath me two orange-footed scrubfowls
scraped and poked through the humus
like cacti. Hungry composters, flight ready, and willing
me gone; their work bore fruit

though no conscious movement directed
their effort. They drilled in for grubs
and bugs as they turned over a soiled
collection, leaving in their wake
a nutrient enriched place.

They edged warily below me, feigning
indifference to my presence though I stood
transfixed, perched in thoughts, scratching
an anxiety that in these gardens my residency
would never turn over so many new leaves.

Walk up Tank Hill

for my lil-dad, Dwight Raggett, Gudanji man

I was Carpentarian born again,
and your eyes growled
give him a go:

so a team sprinted
in and out of drills, a left
and a right, a drop
punt and the perfect hooting
screamer. We ran on sand
and cheered even as certain tempers fractured –
the *life style choices* of remote Indigenous
living:

then one afternoon, after
all that dreaming on a white lined
and dusty oval, with a swim in a pool,
it was the foot-pad, a single
track up Tank Hill:

that stifling
climb, bare feet stone-hopping burnt,
the dragons scuttling
for their shade:

climbing
in familial chatter, someone up line
farted, and amidst howls
of *yalinga* and *black hole*,
those shining chiaking eyes,
a rock silenced
everyone, grazing
my shoulder as it speared
on past:

a reshuffle
in some humour moved
us on, picking
berries as you shared
a little law: *dis one bark medicine*,
dat one tucka, not now but,
he drop ta ground den
millad mob eat'im, an directly
millad sugabag'll sing:

it was all
 red-hot and heady
 as wilderness grew
into country and you were my map, amplifying
 a lore's perspective:

 soon we discovered
the knoll's summit and it was broken
 gaze through scrub:

water
 pumped, slantwise, from bores
 to this hill top, a steel storage
tank burning silver in this late
 afternoon heat:

 water banked
underground for millennia and tapped
 in manicured access holes sung
 in law and now siphoned
for consumption under an authority's bill:

 we repossessed
and the Gulf lifted
 and opened to dark
stringybarks and woollybuts amongst spear
grasses and cathedral mounds – the centuries
 of law disrupted/defiant, singing
a storm still:

 so hard
to imagine a straight spine
but here they were, a raw-ironstone,
 rusted but ochred dancing
 still:

since dwelling off country is to wait for sickness
 like diwurruwurru lantana-
 engrafted:

 heat shimmering
with shadows on cave walls, the red hands
 stencil-blown for company, a mark
signed on a canvas of their making, already
 weathering back to wild stone:

 you perched
in the elbow of a woollybut just
where my snapshot shows you, grinning straight
 back at me:

so in the nature
of circular skin ties:

me a middle-aged munanga; you
my lil-dad, the teenaged ruckman shining
even as storms grazed
side-long with the ache of your sniffing,
a sadness-stone like the ngabaya's bony
choking clutch threatening dead-of-night torment
on top this country's Tank Hill.

Notes:

“Diwurruwurru” is Indigenous language (Yanyuwa/Garrawa) in the Gulf region of northern Australia for “message stick”.

“Munanga” was originally a Yanyuwa word meaning “stranger, the one not known to me, white person” but has now entered Kriol and is used commonly by most of the Gulf's Indigenous people when referring, often derisively, to “whitefullas”.

“Millad” is Kriol in the Gulf region of northern Australia for the first person plural pronoun: we, us, our.

“Ngabaya” is Indigenous language in the Gulf region of northern Australia for “ghost” or “spirit”; originally a Yanyuwa word, this term is now used widely by most Indigenous people of the Gulf.

“Yalinga” is Indigenous language (Yanyuwa/Garrawa) in the Gulf region of northern Australia for “foreskin”. This word should not be voiced out loud as it is connected with Ceremony. It should be read as “foreskin” during public readings. It is commonly used in the Gulf, usually by young males, to cause offence and to tease.

Lynda Hawryluk

Noise carries on a still night

The sky is really close to your head
Held up only by a thumbtack sized moon
Black sleep envelops the landscape
The difference between sea and sky merely moments

There's a noise far off in the distance
A je ne sais pas but its there
Underfoot underbrush underneath us
Far away but too close all the same

We're not known for our bravery
We city folk
Not once removed from the light
In the darkness we're equals with nature
Or so we think
So we hope
But we're not

Night vision advantage eludes us
We wide-eyed homo scaredy cats
Shiver and tremble at every sudden sound

The sky above us offers no protection
It just hangs low near our foreheads like a cloud
We creep through scrub in the darkness
Stepping carefully but it's still much too loud

Silent shadows follow and surround us
Hiding the milling nocturnal crowd
Curious eyes hidden by the blackness
Of a completely coloured-in sketch book page
This child's drawing is a nightmare
We are without vision or knowledge
But we definitely know that something's there

Noise carries on a still night
Of a community of critters outside
Best stay in the light where it's safe now
Or perhaps go back to the city and hide

Luke Johnson

Rural sonnets

This farmer

sees in gritworn blustering beaten reds,
browns that lick the ribcage of every starved
breeder, and from the felt-rimmed sunken
sallow of each eye, sees colours of mud
that aren't there. Leather boots, belt, knife blade
thirsty as a stone, measures his own trunk
against the hide of a yellow box gum,
his fortune to the contour of the dam
bank, resolve in the number of fire breaks
along the road. Though in front of the kennel,
dog twisting and seizing like a snake
rapping at the end of a shovel,
he weighs nothing, no word, hue nor sentiment,
only the shell of the bullet spent.

This boxer

moves between tents, bandage-ready and cool,
bootlaces and the night's economy
untied, a woodenness in the colour
of his cheek. Till an open caravan
with no sink, where the spread and privacy
of eight knuckles is as amplified as
ladies and gentlemen and the pleasure
of combing a straight part starts him at thinking
smart and impermanent. In here he's ligament
and muscle-twitch, a keening
underfed apprentice, all nostril and
upper lip. Out there, he's an hour forty-five
into a crowd of freshly-drunk townies,
two feet deep and skolling for upset.

This muleser

takes short mortgage on the girls in flannelette,
the bandages on his fingers, the clouds,
have hardly chance to set, have hardly
weight to wet, if he thinks he can make them
jump with *BANG* then he's got one hand off the
shears and his fingers forked like fangs.

A weekday rousey getting no less to work
the markers and scratch, to step short between
folds and tails and pick at lambs with ploughman's
catch, does not know about art, nor home-loan deposits,
but he's happy to watch this muleser anyhow—
abbreviating his strokes the way the cold-
blooded Spaniards do. Hey, Goya's just a clown
now dotting the banks of Murray Downs.

Alan Lake

On being a poet

First the howling ambulance
followed by the cop car and
the motorcycle cop and finally
the fire truck scream-screaming:
Get the hell out of our way!
Stay put; put on your brake or risk
being collateral damage. Waves part
and they shoot through the hole
in the rivers of traffic, heading
at speed towards the untoward.

I freeze, mesmerised, then follow
at a safe distance, view today's
carnage – those bloody, broken bodies –
tweet a friend, take and send a picture,
defer lunch. I blend like maybe
I live nearby or recognise a corpse or
am a semi-off-duty journalist who's seen
it all before and is willing to inconvenience
himself while making small talk with
fellow professional accident attenders.

As a last resort, a frazzled young
medic, unable to make any sense
of the human wreckage, yells out:
Is anybody here a poet?

Wes Lee

Deluge

A house with a tidemark around each room;
the milking shed draughty and empty –
spiders move in, and twine.
This is how I found you, although I didn't know
you had been drowned. A pistol in your top drawer
you'd cock and describe how you would take them out,
all takers. You used it on the boar; hung
and splayed on the kitchen table – segmented,
wrapped in freezer bags – the boar who lowered
his head at my high-pitched singing, threatening to charge. He died
for being male. You emptied the scrap bucket by his head,
pressed the barrel in quick when he bent to gorge.
I planted marigolds along the tomato rows
to stave off stink beetles, you showed me
how to crush them: the satisfying split, and pungent
scent between your finger and thumb,
an unwholesome crush; they came in droves,
encrusted, supping the sweetness,
wizening black with their invisible mouths.
Marigolds with their bright orange ruffs –
little souls springing, to draw away
those unstoppable mouths; that blind
insistence. The lupins flowering
when I arrived, and portraits of women along the hall,
I saw in that first tour around the house: photos clipped
from magazines, resembling your wife (all the signs
were there I chose to ignore), but I came with hope,
packed like a blanket around my organs. Like a nurse (or a nun)
I thought I could bring you back to health. I thought
you'd wake smiling like the unconscious man
dragged into a boat or washed up
on the shore, and the nun, (he wakes to the nun)
her helmet shining, his memory lost;
the book she brings him placed beside the bed
becomes his new memory, his lifeline.
I thought I could bring you pages,
I thought I could hover above, and I would be Hepburn
and you would be Tracy, waking from your coma
and my face, the first face you see.

Shooting gallery

You went back each year
to test your skill, a deadeye shot

in the centre of each bullseye –
the booth rigged with a camera

filled the pages of an album;
every November but one.

And I wonder what happened
that year you didn't make it to the fair?

The coconuts in their shies,
the slumped teddy bears, prinked,

waved in front of the eye,
roll up roll up!

How you aged, but that look
of concentration never wavers.

The same decisive moment
caught on film, the same squint

down the line of the barrel,
at each bullet squeezed off.

JB Mulligan

Travels

At the side of the road
the bones of the deer
shed brown ragged skin
as crabs crawl out of shells
into the current.

Cartilage is strung between ribs
and tattered edges of skin
ruffle like feathers in breeze.

Behind the carcass
the railroad tracks
rusted brown, and the grey
of the weathered ties,
stretch from a vanished past
to a disconnected future.

Behind the tracks
the deserted station,
boarded windows
and paint-peeled pillars
housing what is gone,
what waits to depart,
what is yet to come.

Kernels of moments like gems

The field is busy more with stems,
leaves and weeds than with blossoms.
The farmer scratches his bony ass
far more often than he pauses
to watch his children laugh
and kick up dust behind the house,
or looks carefully at his wife
as she spreads the wings of laundry:
she whistles as she pulls the gray
rope of hair from her shoulder
and briefly doesn't look older.
He thinks that maybe later, he'll say
something of how she seemed, but now
there's work to do, seeds in a row,
weeds, insects, and always looming weather,
and if it isn't one thing, it's another,
and later, maybe, something to gather.

Nollie Nahrung

Four letters









Rachel Robertson

Rumpelstiltskin

The touch would be cat's whiskers on her face, the scent earthy. They grew in purple-red clumps at the edge of the road, opposite the Ten Mile Deli, halfway between Rockingham and Fremantle. It was a place of limbo. This must be why he chose it – to talk, he had said. She listened to the sounds of trucks pulling freight to the port, of small packs of motor bikes on a Sunday outing, the paper bag blowing across the curb. What the plant was called she couldn't remember. Words like bulrush, pampas and reed strayed through her mind but none were right. And it didn't matter. To name something is not to know it, someone had said to her once. They stood there, between the two cars, at their desolate halfway spot. The sky clicked into late afternoon. I'm sorry, she said, turning to her car. Fountain grass – that was it, she thought, as she drove north.

*

They met at a housewarming party in South Fremantle. She noticed first the streak of red paint in his hair. "Crimson madder," he explained, part of a forest. That vision, a forest streaked with red paint, took her to Clancy's Fish Pub, dancing with him before the night ended. They were so different, she imagined only a fling, never guessed how long it would last. Something quite accidental led to all those years, that betrayal.

*

Her favourite painting is of the single willow-leaved eucalypt standing in the garden, branches swooping to the ground, every colour but green. He left it behind for her; accusation or kindness, she didn't know. We rarely understand what splits our lives. Was it the broken promises, what happened with the child, her over-generous body? It rained every day the week he moved out, the scent of wet peppermint leaves dogging their steps as they carried household goods to the truck. The half-empty house settled like a cave around her, only whiteness and the weeping gum.

*

She dreamt he read her the story of Rumpelstiltskin. She had a dish of jasmine tea and tried to remember what it was like in the days before they met. Outside it rained. The gutters overflowed and the tin roof sang. She cooked pumpkin ravioli and ate it with toasted pine nuts and creamy white goat's cheese. There was wine in the fridge and she drank two glasses. The rain eased and she heard the water running into the soak well at the front and under the driveway. This suburb was once a riverbank, lush with foliage. Rumpelstiltskin stamped his foot right through the ground and then tore himself in two. That is how the story ended. She wondered: what next?

*

The last flower falls from the frangipani tree on the shortest day of the year. She sees it as she walks to the front door and stoops to pick it up. It is cream with delicate veins of pink. She sees also the streak of cream paint on her left shoe. The last time she wore these shoes she was in Shanghai and walked into a pool of paint, leaving footprints all the way back to her hotel room.

The frangipani smell is faint in the rain but she brings the blossom into the house, places it by her bed. Years ago she wrote poetry. No one now knows this.

It has been a long wait. The lyric returns a broken, half-formed thing.

Sanjeev Sethi

Marginalia

On his forty-fourth I am the first
ever to wish him, not his mate,
not his mother, nor his son or siblings.
In his cloche there never was any cake.
No potlatch on his red-letter day.

His dreams subvocalise his failings,
fantasies are mute expressions
of potent fears. Somewhere in him
there is a bomb whose button he cannot find.
Even the robes he borrows have cuts bigger
than the foxholes he longs for.

Dharma

Morality has little meaning in statecraft. Cathedrals, convents
and suchlike give it currency. Polity pursues language of law:
if it is by the book, it is valid. *Right* (not necessarily bien-
pensant but legit) belongs to the lexicon of governance
but reference to the *righteous* exists in another codex.

Extreme positions are unreal. Often the stentorian voice
of experience resonates in the courtroom of existence:
verities are sfumato. Doublethink is dominion of the prudent
though truth indwells midpoint. In a contest between ontic
and ontology, I know where I stand. Do you?

Sarah St Vincent Welch

As big as anything

She leans out of the shower to check herself in the cabinet mirror. Her hair is a sleek cap, her face small, her forehead lined. She wills her irises to dilate, and they quiver and open. Heather tries to see up her optic nerve and into her mind. Heather is still sleepy, dreamy. In first light her skin is transparent; a vein threads under her skin where the breast tissue rises over her expanding heart.

Heather steps back in the shower to let the water finish waking her. It swirls off her elbows and nipples and nose; she gulps it in. Her body appears fluid, the water flowing over and around her. She checks for her period again as she washes, parting the folds of her labia, cupping water to splash her vagina and turning to splash her anus, rubbing, cleaning, turning back again. She checks the water, checks her hands—no blood; she smells her fingers—no blood smell either. She feels that grinding menstrual signal in the small of her back, but there is no blood and no other indication that it's coming. No pimples. Her hair is greasier than usual, and her breasts are slightly sore, that's all.

Chris passes by on the way to the washbasin. “Long shower! Water!”

She checks the timer. She's not over time. She grimaces at Chris and points with her chin at the bucket that catches the spray from the shower.

Still in her dressing gown, she drags the bucket outside and tips out the water at the base of a sapling. It whooshes over the ground; a slurry forms on the surface. The ground is too hard, it seems to have lost the ability to absorb it. It needs steady gentle rain. They planted the tree when they moved in and it still hasn't grown. It is alive, but waiting. “There'll be some next season,” Chris's parents say. “It has to break eventually.”

“You're washing the topsoil away! What is the matter with you?”

The matter is that she is becoming transparent, as if she is losing her matter. Her fingernails and toenails are paper talons resting over fleshy stubs. When she clips one the crescent glides like an insect wing to the ground. Her hair floats around her head as her brush revs up the static. She drops the empty bucket back in the shower.

She thinks she is losing her body.

That night she hides in the dim study, checking figures on the tax form by the light of the computer screen. Chris, charging in with a receipt, snaps on the light overhead.

“There you are,” he says.

He places a friendly arm around her shoulder and toys with her collar. “When we got married the farm didn't lose a son, it gained a bookkeeper,” he says. They live in the old house with the sapling out the front. His parents live in the new house on the hill. Chris's brother, Geoff, lives

in the parents' extension. They fret over what will happen to the property.

“Great,” she says, glancing at the receipt.

She has to find out what is going on with her body. The next shopping day in town she buys a test kit at the chemist. It rattles as she shakes it; its contents seem so flimsy.

When she comes home the blinds are down and Chris's boots aren't beside the door. The door creaks as she opens it with her foot and sidles in with the shopping, hoping to keep the flies out. The house is cool compared with outside but she still needs the fan.

Heather's urine is warm and aromatic in the plastic cup. She sits on the toilet and sets the test strip afloat on her wee, like a little boat. Two lines draw themselves in the test window; one faint, a shadow of the other.

A shot echoes off Grainger's hill, and then another. The shots and their echoes build a sharp rhythm. They're in the far paddock putting down stock. Wild dogs eat the sheep's face and hindquarters, but leave them alive. She shuts the window and puts the test on the sill. She will see how Chris is before telling him.

The sonographer stares into a screen, and slides the probe over the jelly on her stomach, pressing – sweep, sweep, pause, beep. The grey shadows on the monitor align into what could be a skull (like a little nut) but the shadows reconfigure, and she can't make it out anymore. Heather's bladder aches.

“I'm bursting!”

The sonographer allows herself a sympathetic smile. “Hang in there. If your bladder's not full I can't see through it. Won't be long,” she says. The screen lights the woman's young face. She seems quite substantial to Heather, with sinewy arms and hands, her hair pulled back in a spiky bun, her eyes staring deep into Heather's body.

The ultrasound meant a night in the city. They heard the tram bells through the hotel window. Ding. Ding.

Chris wants to know if it's a girl or boy, but the sonographer can't tell. Heather thinks that means it's a girl, but doesn't tell Chris. No evident penis. The sonographer says it's a “modest” foetus, that they get those sometimes.

They stop at Dymocks on the way to the station. Chris looks for software manuals. Heather finds the shelves of pregnancy books. She slips one out and scans the contents and index. She searches for “invisibility” and, finding no entries, slides it back. She hauls out the biggest book then, opens its glossy pages, and rests it on top of the others, craning over the pictures, of the spaces deep inside women, of blunt-faced fetuses asea in their mothers' wombs. She imagines a woman with her legs in stirrups, a camera threaded inside her, lying desperately still. At home she takes some photos of her own. The picture she takes in the mirror frames the half-sail of her belly. The flash erases her head.

She starts her journal again, moves the ballpoint over the thick pages, carves the words in. *I am not disappearing. I am as big as anything.* Out on the verandah, the hammock sags with Heather's

weight. The apple tree casts fractured shade across her legs, and she studies the light. She sketches patterns over the words she has written, then drops the journal, and lifts up her shirt to let the baby see the sun through her skin.

“Have you ever felt like you’re melting away. Like there’s nothing between you and everything? Like you’re becoming ... nothing?” She speaks softly, more to herself, yet hoping Chris will hear. And he looks at her – puzzled – as he brings out the tea.

“Like you can see everything, but no one sees you?”

He sets the tray down on the wrought iron table, and picks up her journal. “Maybe I did,” he says. “When I did Ag. A lot of people knew each other in college. I didn’t know a soul.”

“Did you feel bad?”

“Well, there was some freedom in it too.”

She sips the tea too early and burns her tongue. She wishes she wasn’t so thirsty. She puts it down, drags herself out of the hammock, and steps inside the shadeline of the roof and, for a moment, isn’t there.

The parents walk around her when they pop in. Chris bumps into her. “Oops. Sorry.” He tries to kiss her definition back. She complains about this, her see-through-ness. Generally, she is on the lookout for her body. In the first three months she could see her oesophagus, a red pipe seared by bile. The vomit clung to the toilet bowl. Now she is a bulging pink sack, a too taut balloon, and her bladder, a window still, is urgent and full. She sees far too much. She wraps a shawl around her.

Heather turns the radio up in the ute as the wheels dig into the ridges of the dirt road, and the baby twists in her like a snake. Town’s two hours away and they need to shop. The hospital is a flight away.

She stops and gets out to pee, then finds a spot beneath a gum to sit in the brown dust, shade on her face, heat on her skin, and she listens to Classic FM with the ute door open. She unbuttons her shirt and looks into her womb at the little girl cuddled to her middle, settled on her lap, sucking a thumb. Shadows poke the hills and stroke the dry dam bed. The wind argues at this place, catches Bach’s Prelude and throws its symmetry to the wild dogs raving far off, and to a distant crow crying. Heather sits with her little girl and listens and watches. Her eye follows the folds of the exposed valley, its gnarly stunted bushes, its complicated contours.

Rebecca Te'o

Soldier boys

If he licked above his lip, he could taste the ocean. His tongue caught a stray grain of sand in the stubble, and he brought it between his front teeth, biting down until it set his nerves on edge, making him wince. Even in the tent, surrounded by the reek of musty canvas, he could smell the water: a strange odour of rusting metal, air and skin. He could hear the waves crashing over the hoarse whisper of the gas lantern outside, over the clatter of knives and forks being stacked on enamel plates. He watched Emma's shadow as she struggled with the zip on the acrid-smelling plastic larder his mother insisted on bringing with them. "Nothing wrong with a few home comforts to keep you civilised," she'd said tartly when Emma had complained about packing the thing. "We used this for years, every time we went away, and I'm not about to break the tradition now."

The feel of the velour cover on the air mattress made his stomach sicken. He remembered all the times they travelled here, a family of four cramped in their yellow Gemini, a dinghy lashed on the roof, trailer at the back. All those roads – those endless, hot tar roads – that he stared at until the sight of the rising heat made him sick and his dad pulled the car over, hazard lights blinking, so he could strain and retch in the dry grass on the embankment. Robert, who never got sick, would hand him his water bottle wrapped in a tea towel and a lolly to suck on; a Mrs Mac's boiled lolly, striped pearl of fruit flavour. Robert liked the berry best, pick one and another three came stuck to it. Score.

When they'd pulled into the campsite a few days ago, he'd recognised the bait shop and the corner store, but everything else had changed. The acres and acres of stringybark were now replaced with rendered homes adorned with yucca plants and grass trees, and garden beds full of bark chip mulch that hid the weeds for a few weeks before the bindiis got the better of the owners' attempts at gentrification. He'd been relieved the place hadn't looked the same but the enduring dread in his guts reminded him that the ocean never changed.

He lay in the dark, thinking about those waves, their relentless rocking through the seasons: tide comes in, tide goes out. He thought about Robert, standing stripped to the waist at the shoreline, hips forward, swaybacked, his body peppered with sand. He listened, hard, as the waves shunted against the tin dinghies tied against the jetty: a dull, repetitious punting that he concentrated on until his heartbeat mirrored the lap, lap, lap of every lick. This must be what it's like before you're born, when all you can hear comes to you, muted, straining, mumbling through liquid dark. As a boy they'd lain together in this tent, Robert beside him in the darkness, both zipped to their chins in salty sleeping bags, itching against wayward grains of sand crusted to the spaces between their toes. Long after Robert was asleep, feeling lost without the glow of a television, he would listen to his father's rumblings about tides and sandbars, and his mother's sighing responses, as they planned what they would do the next day, and the next, and the next until it was time to pack their tow-headed boys back into the Gemini with their jars of beach-combed treasures and head home.

He'd always thought the natural progression of things would lead to him sitting outside a tent, rumbling, while his own son hugged the dark to sleep. But here he was, forty-two years of age,

curled inside the dingy canvas, listening to his partner and his mother plan their days. The place had changed but like the ocean he hadn't, he was still the boy who'd cried until he'd puked on the shore. He hadn't wanted to take this trip, hadn't been to the bay since he was thirteen, the year his father and Robert were lost to them.

His family had been every year before that, since before he could remember. But afterwards: it was – it just – it didn't fit. There *was* no family. Just him. And his mum. A pair, but not the family they'd had. It was she who'd suggested it. "It's time," she'd said, as if biting down on her words. "There are – things I need to say. I need to be there, I need – to say some things." It was rare for her to push so hard for anything, so he'd begrudgingly agreed. Emma, of course, was excited by the prospect. "Just like a Partridge family singing road trip!" she'd said, laughing. He'd had a fleeting memory of him and Robert, howling like pantomime dingoes in the Gemini's back seat as his father's tuneless baritone went hard and strong for the eighty-fourth bottle of beer on the wall. He couldn't remember them ever getting down past eighty. His mother usually put a stop to it well before that. "If I'm to be locked in a car with you lot," she'd said, "the least I want is a melody." At that point his father would push the Neil Sedaka cassette into its slot, and his mother would sing her heart out all the way through *Calendar Girl*, starting at January and going solo until August, her birth month, when his father would chime in. "When you're on the beach you steal the show." And as always, his father punctuated his cheekiness with an exaggerated wink.

After a while, Emma slid through the canvas flap and eased in beside him, trying not to wake him despite the tangle of sleeping bags that seemed to wheeze every time she moved. "God, I'm sorry," she whispered, noticing that his breathing had lightened. "Go back to sleep. We're heading out early in the morning." But it was hours before he finally dropped off again.

Every morning since they'd pitched their tents, just like when he was a boy, his mother had woken him by clattering about, fussing, tending, chattering. This morning she was cooking the fish he'd caught yesterday afternoon, a couple of plump, silvery bream. She grilled them in butter until the sides caramelised and became crispy. "Welcome to the day," she sang in greeting, ruffling his hair and kissing his cheek as soon as he sleepily poked his head out of the tent.

"Smells good," he murmured, reaching out to snap a bit of crisp from the tail of the fish while his mother swatted his hand away. He smiled and, overwhelmed by a flash of childhood memory, his breath caught in a way that took them both by surprise. He turned from her before either of them could speak. Emma's arrival was announced by the shriek of the tent being unzipped. She emerged, begging for coffee, as she always did first thing. His mother laughed, but kept a wary eye on her son.

After breakfast he was mustered into beachcombing. Emma had grand ideas of finding pipi shells and starfish to take home and arrange in their bathroom with artistic delight. Buckets in hand, they headed from the campsite across the road, trudging their way through thin grass and deep, powdery sand until it became darker and harder under their feet. He passed the spot where the anglers gutted their catch, a couple of timber planks nailed to a post with a smell that would raise the dead. He remembered his father standing there, deftly easing his knife into a flathead as long as his forearm: "Wait'll you taste this fella, boys. You're in for a real treat."

He remembered Robert, in a fit of pique over who'd collected the most soldier crabs in their ice cream buckets, throwing a handful of fish guts at him. He'd howled and sobbed, overpowered by the oozing slipperiness as it clung to his neck and chest, until his father had taken him down

to the water's edge to wash the livid muck from his body. His father, ever the gentle heart, had scraped off the slime and provided one of those moments of truth that, years later, continued to nudge the edge of his son's hurt. "You know, you never want to let what someone says change the way you see yourself," he'd said. "You've got the most soldier crabs, and no amount of fish guts in your face will change that."

Emma walked ahead, absorbed in scouring the tide mark for smooth stones and any shell that hadn't calcified too much to ruin its decorative appeal. He stopped, surrounded by the unmistakable holes of soldier crabs, their entrances stippled by the sand stacked in tiny spheres. They were everywhere, just as they'd been when he and Robert had taken his father's yabby pump and drawn them up, suck and plop, onto the sand. They'd gathered them in ice cream buckets, putting their ears to the bottom to listen to the crabs' endless scuttling before their father took some to use as bait for the bream and whiting. He dug his toe into the entrance of a hole and flicked out the sand, overcome by a flash of Robert's face, beaming, hair blowing over his face, his tanned fingers opening to show him the bluest soldier crab he'd ever seen. Robert had hair like the kid from *Storm Boy*: long, wild from the wind, but fine and fair. That hair had floated like threads of blond seaweed as Robert's body was pulled from the water; it had seemed to be alive, part of the ocean, as though the sea was where it was always meant to be.

He sat on the wet sand at the tide's edge and drew his arms around his knees. Emma was engrossed in her search, distracted by driftwood and getting farther away from the water into the part where the sand once again turned powdery and where her tread grew heavy. His mother appeared beside him and threaded her arm through his. They sat, him hugging his knees, her clinging to him, while they watched the relentless push of the waves around their feet.

"It's time to say goodbye," she said. "You need to leave them here." He turned to her, his eyes straining, and she smiled, her expression the same he'd seen decades ago, as they'd slowly lowered Robert and his father into their graves. She handed him a small plastic bag and he tilted it, toppling its contents into his hand. Two necklaces: pipi shells with a small hole punched through each, threaded with grey yarn, kept in bedroom drawers all year and worn around his and Robert's necks every summer – *every* summer – from the time they'd first made them. Occasionally, when the salt had eaten the yarn almost through, they'd change the thread, but most years they just tugged them out of the tangle of treasures at the back of their drawers, placing them around their necks as they pulled out of the driveway. He turned the shells over: initials, written in white correction fluid. A letter R. He traced his finger over it, feeling its slightly raised shape against the smoothness of the shell. Robert had been wearing it when they pulled him out of the water. She'd kept it. All these years, she'd kept it. Until, finally, it was time to say goodbye.

Deborah Wardle

Tapioca tea

They crept from their car, stood close together, unsure of the bush, the space. It was a Sunday afternoon, mid-Summer, crackling hot. Frankie waved from her veranda, walked to the farm gate to assure them they were not lost. She'd talked them along the two-kilometre bush track that ended at her slumping weatherboard on five acres, wondered what travellers did before mobile phones.

"Phone me if you need directions," she'd said as they left the factory on Friday night.

Three slight women and one lean young man walked towards her, clustered, carrying shopping bags, looking about, like sheep approaching a race, ready to bolt.

"You made it."

They stood apart from Frankie, vacillating in this unfamiliar place.

"Welcome, this is my place. I call it heaven. Let's get out of the heat." Frankie ushered them towards the house. She was shorter than her visitors, brown hair wisped at her shoulders, deep-set eyes, dark-shadowed with tiredness, squinted under thick black eyebrows.

They handed over sweet cakes and jam-filled biscuits, teas and packets of lollies.

"You shouldn't have. I baked scones. Something Australian." Frankie worried that her rock like lumps from the oven would be inedible, that the cream would curdle in the heat.

"We will show you how to make black pearl tea." Iris announced.

"Yep, sure. Sounds great."

They worked together on the casual Christmas crew at the local smallgoods factory. Evening shift, four till midnight, packing hams through a cryovac machine, a slushing, turning octopus-like contraption that vacuum-sealed bulky porcine legs into tight plastic bags. Gold-coloured caps were placed over the end of the bone, hiding this trace of the walking animal. Every imaginable shape of processed ham wobbled along the conveyor belt, bagged, labelled, boxed. After the day shift crew bolted for the exit, about twenty workers replaced them, shepherding pieces of pig in various disguises along the line towards load out. Hams rolled off the conveyors by the tonne. The work was heavy, fast, repetitive. Exhausting.

Iris brought chocolates and sugary drinks for smoko, always offered Frankie something as they sat in the canteen recovering from the cold. Frankie would nibble at her vegemite crackers. Her Taiwanese co-workers screwed up their noses when she offered to share. Conversations moved along, nimble one moment, halted and uncertain of where to leap the next. Over the weeks of working together Frankie had asked questions in rare idle moments on the ham line, or hunched around the canteen table. Iris was a social worker in Taipei, working with trauma survivors after floods and tsunamis. She used to work with victims of domestic violence. She said she needed a break. Annie was an assistant accountant and Eva taught violin to primary school children. Davie had a science degree from Taipei University, and worked in a supermarket chain. They wanted to see Australia. Working holiday visas took them away from crowded lives in hot and humid cities. Frankie learned who had siblings, who still lived with their parents. She watched their faces drop when she said her father had died six months ago. They threw their hands to their mouths when she told them her horse, Bob, had died of thirst.

"You look different in civvies, Iris, I mean, Wei Ling." Iris's long purple-black hair, singlet-bare shoulders were covered at work where they wore thick jumpers and tights under regulation white uniforms. Their workroom was set at three degrees, about the same as a fridge.

"Civvies?" Iris worked out the meaning from Frankie's flourish of hands over her clothes. "Yes, you too."

Frankie knew them by their factory names, Aussie names that didn't fit. She'd asked Iris to write her real name on a paper napkin.

"Wei Ling." The pen nearly tore the tissue. She pronounced her name slowly.

"I'll try to remember."

"That's OK. Iris is OK. That is why. We try to make it easier."

On the work line it was too noisy to talk without shouting. Everyone wore squashy earplugs, or large red muffs over flimsy blue hairnets. Amid the roar and hiss of coolers, conveyors and steamers, Wei Ling seemed too delicate a sound to yell at high volume. Workers shrieked, pointed. "More bags." "New product." "Empty the bins." "Hurry up, chop chop." Most people came to understand each other. Some shouted louder, some were silent in their work. Some bristled at incomprehensible conversations. "They ought to speak Australian, who knows what they're gabbling about." The call to "Smoko!" meant everyone peeled off plastic gloves and aprons, headed for the canteen.

They looked across a dry gully to the horse paddock. Frankie's old brown mare stood looking at them over the fence. Tawny ground was almost bare, dust flew as she stamped her hoof against a hovering botfly. Another drought had the land in its claws. In the far corner a large mound of freshly turned earth held their eye.

"That's Bob's grave. The horse." Frankie explained. She told them how she'd gone away after her dad's funeral, needed a break. Neighbours thought she had come home, miscommunication in an ambiguous text. They didn't check the horses as arranged for ten days. "The bore had dried up, no water for them to drink." Four faces stared, trying to make sense of the tale, seeing Frankie's face tighten against tears.

"Bloody developer drilled a deep bore, about a kilometre away, down by the dried up river, lowered the water table around here." She stopped, gulped. They watched a small flock of galahs wheel into a yellow gum canopy.

"Your environment very harsh." Davie said. He picked up a thread of meaning, threw a lifeline to Frankie.

"Specially with no groundwater. I want to save what's left. Deep below." Frankie kicked the dust.

"This drought, it's climate change?" Davie asked.

"Yep, in these parts it means less rain, more risk of fire." She didn't elaborate other facts that plagued her, the loss of Australian plant and animal species, how record numbers faced extinction.

"In Taiwan, climate change means storms, big floods. Very hot." Davie shook his head.

"We get them too, not as big as yours." It was like they were comparing catastrophes.

"Why are you planting trees? No rain." Annie pointed to the patches of green plastic tree guards scattered on the edge of the gully.

"Have to do something. Some might survive, I hope. Less erosion, shrubs for the birds." Frankie scuffed the dirt, remembering bouncing the mattock into hard, hungry ground, to scratch holes for the seedlings.

Crespin seemed a typical country town, where monoculture ruled. Shops, half empty, glared at each other across a single main street, two primary schools, and a small health clinic provided basic services to broadacre farmers and townies. Frankie had moved back a year ago, to care for her dying dad. Watched him fade from shell-like to wafer thin as the morphine drip wafted him away in a haze, saw him take his last breath. She stayed, for the familiarity of her old home, its yellowing papered walls, the paddock for her horses. She'd taken three trailer loads of empty beer bottles and a stinking mound of rubbish to the tip. An only child, the weatherboard where she grew up was her sole inheritance.

She clutched at something her father had said. “Don’t let Kasha drain the bore, girl. You’ve gotta knock him into place.” That was before Bob had died. He’d held her hand, trembling, too clean. She knew her dad had opposed Kasha’s development application, knew that he and weaselly Kasha Duff had fought since they were ruffian kids in school together. She didn’t feel it was her argument to continue. Until Bob died of thirst.

Space and quiet in the empty home had been a salve from years spent pecking around the city. She took time to walk the riverbank land, passed dried-up water holes. She recalled leaping into deep dark pools as a small child. She’d emerge, otterish, her hair hanging in her eyes, seek out her parents, brown-limbed, smoking, lazing on towels. Then her mother was gone, disappeared, like an untimely film cut. Frankie had no memory of her funeral.

After Bob died, she wondered how to rouse a campaign to save the aquifer, not let precious groundwater be squandered in spas and on suburban lawns. Wheezing conversations with her father haunted her. “Kasha’s a crook. Can’t let him take the water.” How did he know? She didn’t know where to start. She’d read the council report, thought she was too late to make an objection.

“Hey. Would you like to ride the horse first? Then we can have a cuppa.” Frankie pointed towards the mare, then raised her hand to her mouth, as if carrying a cup to her lips. They nodded and followed her across the front yard. They stood back while Frankie pulled on the bridle, gasped at large greenish teeth as the bit slipped into Grace’s mouth.

“Grace, these are my work buddies. Everyone, this is Grace.” Frankie led the mare through the gate. They stepped back as one. Annie retreated to the shaded veranda.

“Do you want a pat?” Frankie asked. Eva stepped forward, tentative. Delicate feet, pink painted nails and gold-coloured thongs looked suddenly vulnerable near Grace’s hooves.

“Have you ever touched a horse?” Frankie asked.

“Oh no. Only wealthy people have horses in Taiwan.”

“Not so here,” Frankie rubbed Grace’s face.

Eva reached out, touched the mare’s cheek, caramel skin and smooth brown fur lightly met. She snatched her hand away.

“Her eyes are so big. She bite?”

“She’s safe.” Frankie patted the mare’s neck. Eva approached the side of the horse.

“Stay near her shoulder.”

The mare twitched her skin as Eva brushed her hand lightly on her side. Eva shrieked and leapt back.

“She’s OK. Just ticklish. Thought you were a fly. I’ll saddle up.” They watched, talking fast, excitedly, as Frankie girthed up the saddle. Grace pulled her head to snatch a skerrick of grass from the base of a leaning fence post.

“Who wants a first ride?” Frankie offered. She wore a green, baggy T-shirt and faded jeans. Her runners were worn at the heels, had a hole pushed through by her little toe. Iris stepped forward, nervous in her crisp white sleeveless top, pink shorts and sandals.

“She’s so big.”

Davie approached, his phone high, ready for photos.

“Why do you have a horse?” he asked.

“I know. They’re terrible for this land.”

“How?” He kept his distance.

“They eat the best grasses, leave the weeds. Their hooves squash the life out of these soils. Worse than sheep and cattle.”

“Why you don’t want her? You’re lucky to have a horse.” Iris was coming closer, braver.

“It’s complicated. I love her.” Frankie shrugged her shoulders. “I plant trees and native grasses to compensate. It’s not enough, I know.” She gave Iris a lift into the saddle, where she

clutched the pommel, her sandals pushed through the stirrups, her bare legs gripping tight on leather.

Davie and Annie clicked photos, wouldn't come closer.

"Relax, we're not going anywhere fast." Frankie held the reins under the mare's chin.

"I'm frightened. It's very high." Iris's eyes were wide.

"You'll be right. Hang on." Frankie led the horse on a slow walk around the front yard. Grace's stride swayed her passenger, who hunched forward as if about to topple. Sweat beaded on Iris's top lip. At the end of the ride she slipped to the ground, lurched away from the horse, milky-grey faced.

"You right?"

Iris stepped close to the mare, her hand soft on Grace's neck. She brought her face close, her nose almost touching the mare, breathed deep to smell the earthy sweetness of herbivorous animal. She smiled.

"Take a photo," she instructed Eva, handing over her phone. She stood, beaming, perspiring through makeup.

Eva took her turn in the saddle, an awkward backward lean, flapped the reins like she was imitating a scene from a cowboy movie. She wavered in the saddle, like a candle flame, tenacious in a breeze. Grace sighed and walked slowly, swishing her tail at the flies.

"Grace knows how you feel," Frankie said. Grace relaxed and in the predictable way of large ungulates, lifted her tail and dropped a load of manure, grunted with the effort. Frankie's guests groaned and waved their hands in front of wrinkled noses.

"That's nothing compared to the factory." Frankie laughed.

Standing beside the horse, under a glaring sun, they saw each other as if for the first time. Here they weren't anonymous in identical attire, not of the herd they joined each shift. Frankie felt them looking at her with new eyes. Faces were flushed from the heat, from new exposures.

Inside Frankie's home floorboards creaked, dark-stained dado boards lined the hallway. They gathered in the dimly lit kitchen to make afternoon tea. Davie and Annie sat at the table, heads close over their phones. Taiwan was instantly connected to Crespin, shared photos were "liked".

Frankie examined the labels of Iris's gifts. Strokes and dashes connected into characters, translated as Jujube tea, jam-like in a jar, for mixing with hot water. Lumps of dried granular brown sugar packaged in Taipei. Tapioca pearl, two hundred and fifty grams of black powdery pellets, to be boiled in water for ten minutes, she read the English instructions.

Iris and Eva were setting up saucepans. Frankie tilted her head, to catch nuances, watched her friends talk, looking for body cues, tones, intonations. She could grasp some elements of mood, but had no idea of precise meaning.

"We are talking about making tea, all different," Iris explained. Frankie noticed that as Iris translated thoughts to English her face lost the animated brightness Frankie had seen moment's before talking with Davie, Eva and Annie. It was as if a piece of soft gauze momentarily lay over her brow, eyes, her mouth. Iris's efforts to find and order words were earnest, tentative. Frankie nodded, searched out the implements they needed, as they described them with their hands. Spoons, a strainer, tall glasses. They chatted fast. Iris and Eva disagreed about how much sugar to add. Thresholds of smiles, frowns, gestures, carried intentions, signified import. English sentences felt heavy in Frankie's mouth. She asked for translations of tea-making words. Iris wrote characters and words on a notepad, Eva brought up the translations on her pink-sleeved phone. She clicked on words in an online dictionary, showing Frankie, pointing to the columns, saying the words slowly, patiently.

"We show you Mandarin words. Taiwanese words are many dialects. More complex." Wei Ling explained.

Sugar 糖 Táng. Eva moved her hand like a conductor, indicating the sweet

rollercoaster sound.

Milk 牛奶 Niú-nǎi. Wei ling sang the two sounds, lightly inflected.

Cake 蛋糕 Dàn gāo. Davie explained the first word was egg, then cake, “You say it short,” his voice soft, encouraging.

They laughed at her attempts to say the sounds, repeating the subtle intonations that distinguished each word, over and over. She copied, mimicked, trying to replicate each upward accent, each tonal cadence, the short-clipped gāo in cake. Davie explained nuanced parts of each insect-like character, sketching their delicate shapes. She kept the spidery forms pinned on her fridge for weeks.

Black tapioca pearls glimmered in the saucepan, slid into glasses, glistening with a coating of brown sugar. Iris stirred in black tea, added warmed milk, repeating niú-nai for Frankie to copy.

“It means cow-milk. We do not say just milk.” They sipped together.

“Very good.” Frankie nodded, swallowing the sweet milky tea, dipping for the pearls with her teaspoon, following their lead.

“In Taiwan we drink the pearls through straws,” Eva said.

Frankie daydreamed momentarily, struck by the image of large straws.

“Drawing up groundwater, pearls in a straw, machines sucking on bore casings. Sorry, I’m a bit obsessed.”

“This is serious for you.” Iris topped up the teas.

“Don’t know what to do about the water. I feel so alone with this.” Around the table Frankie explained her efforts to follow her father’s last wishes, to object to the new development, put a stop to the new groundwater bore.

“Kasha’s scary.”

“You should have a meeting, all people around,” Iris stirred the pearls in her glass.

“Yes, everyone in trouble, talk together,” Annie added.

“You need all the evidence. How many other bores fail?” Davie leant forward on his chair.

“Dunno.”

“Taiwan can separate from China. You can find water for Grace. Not on your own.” Eva flicked her hair. “How you spell groundwater?” She tapped the letters onto her phone.

“Dad would like this.”

“Other friends to help,” Iris stated.

Later, as they prepared to leave, they bobbed and half-bowed in thanks. Frankie found herself doing the same in reply, her body mirroring their gestures.

“Thanks for coming.”

“We will help you get underground water returned. Campaign managers.” Davie said with a grin.

“Thanks, that’s great. Appreciated, really.”

She waved them off and returned to the kitchen to wash up. At the sink, remnants of lilting Taiwanese sounds tinkling in her mind, filled the silence.

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Editorial (2)

This issue also contains a number of general submissions that do not directly fit the “Beyond the Divide” theme. This might seem curious at first, but the intention is not to usher representatives of more dominant cultural centres in through the back door.

Themes are not defined in a vacuum, but are brought into relief by exposure to other principles. The general section, when viewed alongside the special issue, enables a stereographic experience of that relief as the contour lines on a topographical map, where there would otherwise have only been the flat planes of an atlas. Hopefully, the lines will soften in the process, as authors on both sides of the divide are equalised and levelled. They may also harden temporarily, as readers become more mindful of the dividing lines in their own reading lives.

A category like “Beyond the Divide” is necessarily vague and mutable. The same is true of its negative, or, to put it another way, “The Rest of the World”. The general section encompasses writers from Long Island, one based in Northern Virginia, another with ties to Sweden, Scotland and Kentucky, as well as authors living in Darwin and New Zealand, who might on another day have fallen beyond the divide. Thus, the general section could most accurately be described as nothing more than a meandering excursion: “Beyond Beyond the Divide”.

There is no implicit hierarchy here. The editorial process can be as capricious as regional and international borders. Culturally dominant nations are not monolithic, but graduated: how, for example, should we shade the North of England on our map? As a whole, this issue of *Meniscus* addresses such questions with a sensitivity that it owes to the scope of its styles, forms and voices, across poetry and prose, on both sides of the divide.

Chris Kerr

Douglas Luman

Restoration Project: Howards End, a 19th century country house

I have been the product of manoeuvres so carefully made that they were far too beautiful. Imagine how a single tree has had to work, isolated, so naked. Castles have centuries to regret themselves. Lumber celebrates renewal & is defeated by three in the afternoon; the rhododendrons are prisoners of the earth, for their feet are gone & it's easy to call a prisoner well.

Imagine what desire is; it's best not to say it out loud.

Midnight greeted an empty pantry, sainted with doubt. Only the light of the moon shining brightly as lace takes up any space. At the moment when the sun is most glorious, only the streets will know.

There's nothing left except decay, the special science of "doing so otherwise," a building so cold as to admit it's been defeated, to say *look how the faithful have tried the way. Look what happened to them.*

References:

Forster, EM 1989 *Howards End*, New York: Random House.

Le Duc, V 1875 *On Restoration*, translated by Charles Wethered, London: Marston, Low, & Searle.

Restoration Project: The strange high house in the mist, a colonial house

Graveyards get out all the proper gods, disquieting soliloquies in whispers—the strange paradoxical speech of serious accidents. Belfries employed at night never tell happy stories.

The world has its phenomena: at evening, no one sees their own heresy.

Suppose you can't navigate every reference to its origin. I have said plenty regarding difficult things about which I know nothing, though I have several allusions to peril stuffed in my coat pockets.

This morning, my existence is imposing & I think about it when looking in the mirror. The more I see, the less I wish. *Why* becomes just another conditional, & silence, merely censure in which the body participates, conscious and close-mouthed, a quarry of knots. The whippoorwills warn of the strange unknown asking *who is it* in their dreaded falsetto.

What a Cyclopean moment an hour becomes. I do not wish the souls of the young to keep leaving the planet. Think of the building's horror when all it can do is watch.

References:

Lovecraft, HP 1931 "The Strange High House in the Mist", *Weird Tales*. 18.3 394-400.

Le Duc, V 1875 *On Restoration*, translated by Charles Wethered, London: Marston, Low, & Searle.

Adam Day

To his wife

Sleeper, you have wakened from these months
into the darkness and distended silence – the broken
lamp and books on the bedroom floor, desk
where the dresser once was, no fireplace but a doorway
and the black cavity beyond. The walls
papered with rungs of light, the floor
moving like brown river water beneath you –
cutting a finger, breaking a tooth, the glottis
freed from a tumour of the tongue – speak
now.

John Grey

Len's wife and eight kids

Len carries a photo of his wife
and his eight kids
inside his wallet.

One night,
stopped by a cop for speeding,
he fumbles for his licence,
mistakenly hands that snapshot
to the officer.

Len thinks he's handing
the city's finest his identification.
Cop looks at it,
lets Len off with a warning
that's about twenty years too late.

Jessica Seymour

An ace up my sleeve

“I don’t know – I guess I kind of...don’t really think about it?”

Blank stares.

Emily responded slowly, as though she were speaking to a child or an idiot: “*Everyone* thinks about it.”

I pulled my blanket up further to cover my flushing chest and looked down, avoiding their stares.

“I don’t” I said, shrugging like it was no big deal.

But it was a big deal. Of course it was a big deal. If it wasn’t, then they wouldn’t be looking at me like I’d just told them I liked to torture small animals or cut myself. You’d think I’d just confessed to something heinous and unforgivable. Amy had even reached over to turn off Netflix so that they could stare at me without getting distracted by Matt Murdoch’s adorable wounded duck face.

“But I mean...aren’t you *curious*?” Jenny asked. Her pyjamas rode low on her chest, bearing the hopeful beginnings of an A cup.

I shrugged, but I knew I was just digging myself in deeper. I shouldn’t have said anything at all. So what if I didn’t see the point in sex? I was just a late bloomer, that’s all – like Abed from *Community*. Or Sheldon Cooper from *The Big Bang Theory*.

Amy shifted over, resting her hand gently on my knee as though she were worried about spooking me. “Did something...happen, Katie?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You know.”

But I didn’t know, and she looked seriously uncomfortable. She let her long hair fall into her eyes so that she wouldn’t have to look at me and picked at the fluro green nail polish we’d spent ages painting on.

“Did someone hurt you?” she asked finally. Jenny and Emily both reeled backwards as if they’d been slapped. Their eyes, which still bore the remnants of our mascara and winged-eyeliner experiments, were wide with horror.

“No!” I said sharply. “Of course not, nothing *happened* – I just...never gave it much thought.”

“But you went out with Adam Wood last year,” Jenny said. “You must have at least thought

about it. You're both sixteen."

I only went out with him because there had been rumours going around that I was gay. I'd never had a boyfriend before, and in a town like ours being gay was the sort of thing that got you bashed up in the carpark after school, so I'd needed to find myself a red-blooded male as soon as possible. There were only a couple of guys in my year who were within my reach, and Adam Wood had been the least offensive option. Jenny was right, though. Adam and I had both been sixteen, and when he'd tried to invite me over to his place for "Netflix and chill", I'd called the whole thing off.

"Yeah nah, I know," I replied, picking at a bit of fluff on my blanket and ignoring the itch underneath the mud mask which was supposed to stay on for at least another hour. Jenny's mum helped me put it on and I didn't want to ruin it by scratching a line out of it. "I guess I'm just not, like, ready for it. Maybe I need to be older?"

I said it like a question, but they all deflated and smiled easily as though I'd offered the key to fixing all of their problems.

"Yeah," Jenny replied, sinking back against the gross tartan pillow she insisted was the comfiest thing in the world. "You probably just haven't met the right guy yet."

"Or, you know, girl," Emily offered, shrugging in a way that was supposed to make it seem like it was no big deal. "We'll still love you."

I wanted to tell them all how stupid they were being, but I just didn't have the words. Instead, I gave them what I hoped was my most grateful smile.

"Thanks guys."

*

Everywhere I went, I saw it.

An ad for water with the words: "I'm wet...are you?" and "Can I turn you on?" A woman with her mouth open, looking more like she was about to give head than bite into the sandwich floating next to her lips. Walking through the shops on the way to meet the girls, I passed a massive picture of bread which had been arranged to look like a penis, a naked woman contorted into a position only a gymnast could pull off – advertising socks of all things – and one ad for frickin' *juice*, which had a banana and a carrot locked in a passionate embrace.

And I would stare at these images and wish that they did something for me. They obviously worked on everyone else – otherwise advertisers wouldn't use them. Right? I mean, if people didn't want sex, then advertisers wouldn't use it to sell laptops, fridges, and gloves.

Gloves? I turned back to look and sure enough there was a woman standing naked on a billboard, wearing nothing but fluffy blue gloves.

"Because that is *so* practical!" I said out loud, waving my hand in the direction of the ad and ignoring the bewildered looks from the people around me.

The blokes didn't work on me either. I would look at the two guys standing with their lips inches apart, advertising gelato, and I just thought it was nice to see some diversity in mainstream media. The guy in the pasta sauce ad looked like he'd obviously put a lot of hard work into his ab muscles, but I didn't want to reach into the picture and run my fingers over them. Instead, I wanted to reach through and make him put a *damn shirt* on before he got an oil burn or something. That shit *hurts*.

I liked the cologne guy in the TV ads – he was funny. But not funny enough for me to want to take my clothes off and rub all over him, like Jenny and Emily talked about whenever the ad came on.

There was something wrong with me. There had to be.

*

“Can I buy you a drink?”

I put my finger down on the line I was reading and looked up. There was a guy next to my table. He was nice-looking, the way the Calvin Klein models were, but he was wearing more clothes so that was something to be grateful for. My friends had abandoned the table in search of more drinks and I was meant to be guarding their bags, but after I pulled my book out I got a bit distracted. I gazed around quickly. All the bags were still there.

“Um, no thanks,” I said, finally answering the guy's question. I had to yell to be heard over the pounding bass. *Why* did people insist on coming to these places? It was impossible to hold a conversation.

What's-His-Name joined me at my table, shifting one of the purses abandoned by my friends and leaning forward so that he could shout in my ear: “What are you reading?”

I held up the book so that he could read the cover. Maybe he was a lit major, like me?

“That's cool,” What's-His-Name shouted. “I didn't know they made that movie into a book!”

Obviously not.

“You want to go somewhere quiet?” he asked.

I shook my head, holding up the book again to try and indicate that I was happy where I was. He didn't seem to understand.

“You can take the book with you!” he shouted.

I shook my head again. It was starting to hurt from the music and the alcohol and What's-His-Name's breath on my cheek. I saw Marlene and Courtney across the room – they were hard to miss in the sparkly tops and leather skirts they'd worn out tonight. They'd made me wear a short skirt as well, but at least they'd let me wear a t-shirt on top. I tried to signal that they should come over and get me out of this conversation. Marlene caught my eye and I saw her expression change the moment she realised that What's-His-Name was talking to me. She gave me a thumbs up.

I looked back at What's-His-Name. He was handsome, I could tell that much. But he did nothing for me. He didn't make the heat coil in my belly like I'd read about in books, he didn't make me want to bat my eyelashes and curl up in his arms like I'd seen in movies. I thought about letting him take me somewhere quiet, like I was obviously supposed to. Like I'd seen women do. But then, if I didn't want to why should I? Maybe he just wasn't "the right guy" I'd been told to expect.

"I'm just going to stay here" I shouted into What's-His-Name's ear. I waved my book in his face. "And read". What's-His-Name brushed his hand down my bare arm. I watched him do it. "Could you not?" I said.

What's-His-Name took my elbow and tried to pull me away from the table. I held on. I felt my adrenaline spike as I realised that he wasn't planning on taking "no" for an answer. He hadn't even *tried* to find out my name – or even tell me his.

"Get off me!" I said, forcing it out from the diaphragm like I'd been taught in drama classes in high school. Several people turned to look when they heard the noise.

Marlene and Courtney were at my side in an instant, taking a shoulder each and glaring at him. What's-His-Name held his hands up like he was surrendering, but there was a quirk to his lips.

"Back off!" Courtney shouted. Her eyeliner was so sharp it looked like it could cut a man, and I thought I'd never felt safer than I did with her beside me.

What's-His-Name said something, but I couldn't hear it over the noise. Then he was gone – disappearing into the crowd like he'd been made of smoke – and the girls grabbed their purses and my hands and led me out into the warm, summer air. The stink of alcohol and vomit outside of the club bore down on me from all sides. That, and the adrenaline which was still pumping through my veins, made me a little dizzy.

"Woah!" Marlene said, holding me up by my elbow.

"Let's get you home – did you have a lot to drink?" Courtney asked.

"No" I replied.

Marlene had me by the right arm. She pulled my book out of my hand and folded down a corner – I squeaked but I let it happen – and stuffed it into my purse.

"Sorry," she said. At first, I thought she meant the book. But then she added: "I thought you might like him, he was hot."

"He was a jerk," I said. "He thought *The Hobbit* was just a movie."

Neither of the girls seemed to understand what I was talking about, but they nodded sympathetically anyway. They knew, at least, that something had gone wrong between me and What's-His-Name, and they weren't blaming me so I was grateful.

"He just wanted to get laid," Courtney said, shaking her head at Marlene. "Katie's too classy for a fuck in the alley."

“I’d have done him,” Marlene said, and the look they shared said that Courtney agreed with her. Then the two women looked at me. “Maybe you shouldn’t have worn that skirt,” Marlene said.

“You gave it to me!” I replied.

“Yeah, but I mean – we thought you wanted to be pretty tonight?”

“I did!”

“No, pretty as in *sexy*.”

I didn’t understand. I couldn’t see how wanting to be pretty and wanting to have sex could be considered the same thing. “Sex was *never* my intention!” I said.

But they just shook their heads sadly.

“You shouldn’t have worn that skirt.”

I felt heat rising in my cheeks and didn’t say anything as they led me down the street to the cab rank.

*

I couldn’t make myself want it.

I tried. Oh, did I try. I let Adam Wood feel me up at the bus station and tried to feel something beyond boredom when he slid his hand down my thigh and then up my skirt, toying with the edge of my knickers.

“Is this okay?” he had asked.

“Okay” was literally the only word I could think of to describe it. “Breathtaking”, “exciting”, “unforgettable” were all just words to me at that moment. I nodded anyway, because he’d asked permission and the least I could do was grant it. I had to fake a moan so that he wouldn’t get offended.

I moved to the city, where being gay was not only acceptable – it was celebrated. Hannah was a lesbian, and after some fumbled dealings with her we agreed that I probably wasn’t one. I’d liked to lie on the lounge with her and cuddle. I’d enjoyed laughing with her and watching TV and listening to music. But the sex just...didn’t work. I liked Rhianna’s *S&M*, and Marlene thought that might mean I was into BDSM, but I freaked out when she tried to tie me up.

I also liked *The Big Bang Theory*, but after a few seasons I found Sheldon and Amy’s relationship kind of...scary. He didn’t want to have sex. Like me. He just wanted to do experiments and hang out with his girlfriend. I could understand that. I hated that she kept pushing for it, though, and that she thought that there was something wrong with *her* – because any idiot could see that it was Sheldon who was the problem. I wanted Hannah to understand that too. That *I* was the problem here, *I* was the broken one, that it was *me* that needed to change. But in the end we broke up.

“Maybe you just haven’t found the right guy,” Hannah had told me, running a hand through my hair and trying to soothe me as I cried for everything I was losing.

I was straight, apparently. I was just really bad at it.

*

“But don’t you love me?”

Graham ran his hand over my side, and I just wanted to *feel* it. Instead, I sighed. “Of course I do.”

I didn’t.

But I was starting to. And if I didn’t give him something, he would leave. All the others left. In high school, they taught us that “don’t you love me” should set off warning bells. That it was a statement designed to guilt-trip girls into putting out, and that we shouldn’t do anything that we weren’t one hundred percent comfortable with. But that was when we were fifteen and sixteen, feeling the stirrings of puberty tearing apart our self-control. Now, at twenty-two, the “don’t you love me” was a reasonable question. Sex and love were inseparable. I couldn’t have one without the other.

I turned my body to face his but he was already leaning away.

“You know they have female Viagra now,” he said, sounding tired. He was so handsome. Smart, too – he did investment banking and liked to teach refugees how to speak English on the weekends. He was pretty much my favourite boyfriend.

“But I’m not old,” I said. “Or sick.”

I’d read about the Viagra, and I’d considered it. It wouldn’t work if there was a pre-existing medical condition, but I’d been to the doctor a dozen times and they’d never found anything wrong with me. I was just...broken.

“Well something is wrong,” Graham replied, echoing my thoughts. He ducked his head to hide it in my shoulder. “I just want us to be happy,” he said. I felt his breath tickle my cheek.

I wanted us to be happy too. I would have liked to lay with him just like that, feeling his arms around me and his warm breath on my cheek. But I was as tired as he’d sounded when he suggested medication.

“Maybe you should just go,” I said.

He left. I felt a stirring of regret smothered with guilt as I watched him put his pants on and head for the door. It wasn’t his fault that he couldn’t make me want him. I liked to cuddle, and even kiss when the mood took me. But anything beyond that left me cold. I would rather sit up late and debate politics with him, or set out a picnic spread and read for hours on the lounge room floor, or laugh at the noises he made when he was about to sneeze.

I wrapped my arms around my legs and lay on my side in the warm patch of the bed where

Graham had been, and I reminded myself of the words which had been spoken to me so often that they'd been seared into my heart. He wasn't the right guy for me. I just needed to meet the right guy.

Until then, I would just keep being broken.

Iain Britton

On the edge

success depends
on some state
of the nation address
delivered by my father beside the garden incinerator

i live on the jittery edge of a thin seismographic line
of yellow smoke

Perversity

ignoring good balance
she swivels lightly on her chair

i've these pictures in my head
which allow for manoeuvrability

a perversity locks in
should i lose too much

Uncensored

wax-eyes knit leaves
bustle through shrubs
insect thermals
procreative mayhem
and the uncensored silence
of hidden glances

Sunday

i remember clearly
a kite drop to the ground

dragging a boy through pigeons

*

two women share a cigarette

fingers pronged they
flick ash at the sky

Sara Hughes

My Grandfather in the pulpit

His hands are temples made of playing cards.
His palms tease the air around the podium,
caress the words pouring from his mouth,
as if trying to catch the crescendo of each verse
before releasing it to the congregation.

In the choir loft, women bow like jewelled butterflies
behind men. After church they flutter
on the lawn in sherbet-coloured dresses.
He sees me on the hardwood pew,
my knees smooth as river stones.

I don't know how to ask him anything.
After the war, I was real messed up,
he says. *But I ended up where I was meant to be.*
He can't tell me where I'm supposed to go.
He believes a man can trust a woman to follow.

My Grandmother in her kitchen

Her hands are magnolia blossoms.
She kneads biscuit dough
like a tired man's neck.

In her home, a woman stalks
like a bobcat at night.
She takes what she wants
in the darkness.
She licks a man's shoulder
before sinking in her teeth.

*Did you ever love a man
besides my grandfather?* I ask.
*I loved my father, she says, and Jesus.
My grown sons, my six brothers.
Every grandson, nephew, uncle and in-law.*

Yes, she's spent a lifetime
doing the terse work of loving.

The big picture

Andrew doesn't tip
A capitalist system of exploitation
As long as minimum wage glass half full
Is topped up from the tip jar,
employers wriggle out
Of a fair wage for fair work.
Andrew will not be complicit
Andrew will not be compliant
Andrew never tips.
Ms Jackie serves her customers with a smile
Her smile don't slip no matter what
Three children and as many jobs
Her smiling muscles so tired right now
They give up one second, they ain't getting up again.
Gotta keep smiling.
Smiles bring tips.

In Chicago for ASCO
Taxi from the Hilton glides down Luther King Drive to McCormick Place
Winds of change and progress have blown right through The Windy City
And the Blacks are running the place.
More black than white everywhere
running cafés, directing traffic, keeping the streets clean.
The thirty thousand mostly white bright minds
at the convention centre would be lost without them.
On the CTA train in from O'Hare
Barely a white face or a pair of blue eyes to be seen.
The mechanical voice reminds you
"Soliciting and gambling are not allowed on the trains"
And you really know this home of the blues
is black.

When the time comes at last for the last number 4
Going Cottage Grove all the way down 95th Street
Jackie'll tell her kids there's no movie this week.
That Irish man with the American Society of Clinical Oncologists badge
Sat on his ass three whole hours.
Only left when his battery went low.
A patronizing smile like he was doing her a favour
And said
"We need a fairer system, so I never tip."
Her boss yelled at her before she left
She must have messed up
If that white doctor didn't tip.

The night bus goes slow in the wet. Rain darkens the sandy Lions

Guarding the Art Institute from those who don't have thirty five dollars beyond survival need
And Ms Jackie wonders

If the "American Dream" wasn't a lie all along
How come moving pictures on a big screen
Is still the best "dream" she can afford for her children?

Andrew doesn't think about Ms Jackie.
Andrew only sees the Big Picture.

Joe Banfield

“Now a major motion picture”

I'm in the Alps, at a place called Les Brochoux, to visit the set of the movie they're making. There's snow everywhere and yet it never snows. On the mountains it looks soft and white but on the roads it shines like glass under the moon, mirror grey and dank. The movie they're making is based on my novel.

The cast and crew are staying in the same hotel as me, L'Abricotine, and in the evenings we sit in the bar smoking and drinking. I sense they are wary to discuss the process of filming in case one of them inadvertently criticises the source material. I don't care. Some of them ask me about their characters, if they're playing them right.

“You're doing great, I say.”

Mostly I'm left to my own devices until Ritt wants my advice on a particular scene. He shows me his notes on the script.

“What you think if we change this to this?” he asks, pointing at a line-edit with the end of a biro.

“Looks good to me”.

“You don't like,” he says, shaking his head.

“No, I like.”

“You want we make you executive producer?”

“No, no,” I say.

We'd spoken on the phone a few times but it wasn't until I arrived in Les Brochoux that we finally met. Originally I hadn't planned on coming at all, but my father had recently passed away from a long illness and the studio had offered to fly me over and put me up in a hotel for free.

“I am so pleased you came,” Ritt says, removing one of his gloves with his teeth so he could shake my hand. “Real men, they don't shake hands with gloves on, no?”

“Yeah.”

“Come here.”

He ushers me out onto the bar terrace and extends his arm down into the valley of the mountain where the sun's reflection chimes off an enormous expanse of water.

“You know what this is?”

“That's Lake Geneva.”

“When we finish, the crew and the cast, we all go swimming naked, okay? To celebrate and so we don't forget.”

The barman comes out with two glasses of sherry.

Ritt says, “I am sorry to hear of your father” He closes his eyes and shakes his head.

“It's fine,” I say. “He was ill for a long time.”

“So terrible. But this place, it is called a refuge, and you know what is a refuge?”

“Yes.”

“Somewhere for a person to have protection and to feel safe. You feel safe?”

“I guess.”

“Good. We are friends now.”

I see a few copies of the novel lying about. One of the producers keeps a battered paperback in his back pocket. My publishers are in the process of printing a new edition in anticipation of the forthcoming film. Bottom centre of the dust jacket it says “Now A Major

Motion Picture” in tiny gold lettering. I feel sick.

The screenwriter shows me the lines he likes, then, rather tentatively, the dialogue he feels needs changing, eyeing me warily across the lobby table as though I might at any minute explode with rage. To be honest, these scenes they’re filming, I don’t remember writing them at all. The dialogue, now I revisit it, seems laboured, staid. I can’t believe we’re all here to bring it to life.

My father in his bed says my name and then leaves the room. Not in the sense that he gets up miraculously and walks out of it, more in the sense that I feel a departure of sorts, a light being extinguished you might say, a sudden quiet absence beneath the sheets, behind the eyes.

I take myself off into the Alps, passing through the mountains and climbing down into the valley. Snow shifts and slips on the slopes. In the distance, and against the backdrop of the jagged *Chablais massif*, I can see the *Mossettes* chairlift, suspended between two terminal towers, carting souls off into the heavens.

Then onto a place called *Les Lindarets* where they keep herds of goats walled up in neat little folds. The summits of the *Dents du Midi* rise out of the mountain range like knuckles. The herders sit on the walls, throwing feed to the goats. I raise a hand in their direction but they watch silently while I pass through.

My father says to me, “You wrote a book about me, didn’t you?”

“About you and mum,” I say.

“When was this?”

I bring a glass of water to his lips then wipe his mouth.

“Last year,” I tell him.

“Was I happy?”

“Last year?”

“No. In the story you wrote. Was I happy?”

“You were very happy,” I say.

“And your mother?”

“She was happy too.”

I climb out of the valley and into the foothills. Some of the crew are staying up here, at the *Montriond* commune. There are sparse fields and bare spruce timberlines where birds alight and roost, cawing feebly against the cold hard face of the mountains. Caps and peaks rise up like thoughts, some topped with patches of snow, others black and barren as cinder-cones. The cleats of my hiking boots scrape along the walking paths. I come across some other hikers who smile and say something to me in French.

“They’ve put me on the ground floor ‘cos I’m on my way out.”

“Don’t be silly,” I tell him.

“It’s so they haven’t got so far to cart me when it’s over. You go and ask them.”

I press his pillows and pour him a glass of water. “This view’s nice. Lots of sunlight,” I say.

“Then why’s it so cold?”

It really is cold; the money plant I bought my father when he first came here is weeping, and outside, little gems of frost cling to the leaves of the orange hedge plants and dogwood. Sunshine but no warmth.

On set, the child actor playing the character based on myself looks up from his Styrofoam cup of soup and smiles at me. I smile back. The actor who is meant to be my father is the only name on the cast list that I’ve heard of. He says to me, “We should talk.”

“Okay then.”

Huge icicles hang like organ pipes from the hotel terrace. “If one of those were to fall on someone from that height,” the actor says.

“What did you want to talk about?”

“Oh, yeah. So this scene where my character follows the woman up to her hotel room. Like, why’s he doing that? He’s on holiday with his wife and kid and then he just goes through with a thing like that.”

I look up at the icicles. They glimmer strangely and pulsate in the quick light, as if alive, shimmering blue and wet under the terrace lights. “Well,” I say. “It’s not a happy marriage, is it?”

“No, of course not.” But up till that point I kind of liked this guy. He looks after the kid and he tries to get the wife some help with her drinking. What’s he thinking?”

“You know, at this point in the story I think he’s very tired and really he’s searching for an excuse to get out.”

“Of the marriage?”

I shrug.

“So, it’s like a self-destruction kind of thing?”

“If that’s the way you want to play it.”

He scratches in his beard and slumps his shoulders. “Man,” he says.

To my father I say,

“Do you want to talk?”

His breathing is short, laboured. The sheets are pulled up to his chin. “About what?”

“Anything you want.”

He swallows, coughs, swallows again. “I need to say sorry, don’t I?”

“For what?”

He closes his eyes. “I can’t remember. But there’s always something to be sorry for.”

“You’re fine, dad,” I say.

He opens his eyes. “I am?”

“Don’t worry about anything.”

“I’m pleased I can’t remember. I don’t want any sad thoughts in my head and I don’t want any bad feelings.”

“There aren’t any.”

“There aren’t?”

“You’re fine, dad.”

They’re packing up the sets while the last few scenes are being shot. The trailers are disassembled and loaded onto the cablecars. I go to the commune and watch the hikers picking flowers and walking down through the cols, the sun passing behind the massif drawing the entire valley in darkness. Some of the goats wander out to the trail and I feed them tussocks of grass from my hand.

We drink Manzanilla sherry and apricot wine, eating fondue and listening to Ritt sing and play the guitar. The hotel owner joins us and reads some of the cast their tarot fortunes. The moon is high and bright.

We go out to the entrance, a handful of us, and watch the long-eared bats flit to and from the chimneystacks. The child actor is at my side, looking up into the darkness and the darting shapes circling the hotel. The owner comes out with a stepladder and climbs up to the terrace. The barman comes out above him and hands down a blowtorch.

Firing it up, the owner calls down to us, “Is dangerous, no? The ice.”

The flame from the blowtorch lights the underside of the terrace where the icicles hang perilously. In the glow you can see them begin to run as the ice slowly begins to melt away, leaving the larger hunks clinging to the underside of the terrace. These slabs are a deep blue and sequined with pink and purple lichens. The blowtorch moves from side to side, gradually separating the ice and melting the crystals. The boy by my side who is playing me catches his breath. When I look down at him he is smiling, his eyes bright and warm. He takes a glove off, flexes his fingers and then takes my hand in his.

Christina Rau

Judith leans against a lamppost

Don Lockwood spun around at whipping
speed, jazzed up about the drops
splishing all around.

Judith has never seen
Singin' in the Rain, has an aversion
to Technicolor, musicals, and Technicolored musicals.

She leans instead, holding her lapels
together over the V in her top
having forgotten her scarf.

She thinks of Blanche DuBois.
The air remains thin. The air stays cold.
She wants to call out "Stella!" into the night windows.

She wishes herself a pathetic fallacy she can keep,
a scene swelling in black and white, zooming
out from up above in slow motion swirls.

Judith fades into the warm buzz,
the projector left on, the reel flapping on
the wheel, growing warmer from the heat of the bulb.

The Wedding Tree, Tanglewood

It has grown over itself
vinelike in two years' time.
Yellow-green flora once
a welcoming tent of secret
silent nature now monstrous,
a puzzle of walled woodsy
keep-out-ness,
now keeping secrets:
its and ours.
Before it on the lawn
a violent hovering of fruit flies,
midair, and bees, zipping
through to berries
on the other side of the path
 red round
 poison delicious

Christopher Mulrooney

brisket

in the bleak midbrisket
let the boxer now say
I did receive no punch
or nay a graze a swipe
as testifieth the referee
a water fly of the dressy age

VOW

Berlinsky the great composer was asked
and being asked simply replied what have you
to say against the part played by the one
instrument that in any way concerns the other
and so forth in the general way of business

Author biographies

Joe Banfield

Joe Banfield is from Brighton, UK. He graduated from UEA's Creative Writing MA programme in 2014 and is currently writing his first novel, set during the English Civil War. He lives in Norwich where he is studying for a PhD.

Cristina J. Baptista

Cristina J. Baptista is a first-generation Portuguese-American writer whose work has appeared in *DASH*, *The Cortland Review*, *CURA*, *The Ledge Poetry & Fiction Magazine*, and elsewhere. She holds an English PhD from Fordham University and teaches in Connecticut, USA. She is also a 38th Voyager—one of 85 people in the world selected to travel (in Summer 2014) on the 38th Voyage of the Charles W. Morgan, an 1841 wooden whaleship that is the last remaining one in the world. Baptista is also a documenter and poet of the Portuguese immigrant experience aboard whaleships.

Zela Bissett

Zela Bissett is a writer and teacher who fosters an appreciation for the arts and arts production in young people.

Donna Lee Brien

Donna Lee Brien, PhD, is Professor of Creative Industries at Central Queensland University, where she leads the Creative Arts Research Group.

Iain Britton

Iain Britton is a poet who lives in Auckland. His work has been published internationally in many countries including the UK, US, Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand. Since 2008, Iain has had five collections of poems published: *Hauled Head First into a Leviathan*, (Cinnamon Press), was nominated for Best First Collection category in the Forward Poetry Prizes, 2008. Further books followed, mainly in the UK, with work also included in the *Shearcatcher Poetry Anthology* published by Shearsman Books, 2012. A new collection of poems, *photosynthesis*, was published by Kilmog Press (NZ) in 2014.

Jeremy Cornelius

Jeremy Cornelius is currently a doctoral student in English at Louisiana State University. He received his BA in Creative Writing at Beloit College in 2012, where he worked as an editor for the *Beloit Fiction Journal*.

Susan Davis

Dr Susan Davis is Senior Lecturer at Central Queensland University and a researcher with extensive experience as a director and writer of theatrical scripts.

Adam Day

Adam Day is the author of *A Model of City in Civil War* (Sarabande Books), and is the recipient of a PSA Chapbook Fellowship for *Badger, Apocrypha*, and of a PEN Emerging Writers Award. His work has appeared in the *Boston Review*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, *American Poetry Review*, *Poetry London*, *Sweet Mammalian*, *The Iowa Review*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, and elsewhere. He coordinates *The Baltic Writing Residency* in Sweden, Scotland, and Bernheim Arboretum & Research Forest.

Barbara De Franceschi

Barbara De Franceschi is an Australian poet who lives in Broken Hill, a small mining town in outback New South Wales. She has produced two collections of poetry and her work has appeared in a broad variety of anthologies and journals Australia wide, online and in other countries, as well as being featured on national radio. Barbara facilitates creative writing workshops for health science students as part of the *Enrich – Art in Health* programme, an initiative of the NSW University Department of Rural Health to increase communication skills, and expand attitudes to complement undergraduate studies.

Kevin Doyle

Kevin Doyle is from Cork, Ireland. He has had stories published in many journals in Ireland including *Stinging Fly* and *The Cúirt Journal*. His stories have been included in notable anthologies such as *Irish Writers Against War* (O'Brien, 2003) and the *Hennessy Book of Irish Fiction 2005-15* (New Island, 2015). He has also won awards in the *Sean O'Faolain Prize* and *Ian St James International Short Story Award*. He teaches creative writing and is currently completing a novel.

Naomi Elster

Naomi Elster is completing a PhD in cancer medicine and was the focus for the Irish Cancer Society's *'Paint It Pink'* breast cancer campaign in 2015. Her short stories have been published internationally, including in *Crannóg Magazine*, *Sentinel Literary Quarterly*, and recently in *Mosaics: An Anthology of Independent Women*, and *West Trade Review*. She writes freelance nonfiction articles on science, women's issues, and travel. Her first play, *Scabs*, was critically acclaimed and is due to be published by Lazy Bee Scripts. She co-founded and was editor in chief of *HeadSpace*, a non-profit mental health themed creative writing and art magazine which was distributed to psychiatric and general hospitals and community mental health support groups across Ireland and in the UK.

John Grey

John Grey is an Australian poet and US resident, recently published in *New Plains Review*, *South Carolina Review*, *Gargoyle* and *Silkworm*, with work upcoming in *Big Muddy Review*, *Main Street Rag* and *Spoon River Poetry Review*.

Phillip Hall

Phillip Hall is a poet working as an editor with *Verity La's* Emerging Indigenous Writers Project and as a poetry reader at *Overland*. In 2014 he published *Sweetened in Coals*. In 2015 he published *Divurrwurru*, a book of his collaborations with the Borroloola Poetry Club. He is currently working on a collection of place-based poetry called *Fume*. This project celebrates Indigenous people and culture in the Northern Territory's Gulf of Carpentaria.

Lynda Hawryluk

Dr Lynda Hawryluk is a Senior Lecturer in Writing at Southern Cross University where she is the Course Coordinator of the Associate Degree of Creative Writing. Lynda lectures in Writing units and supervises Honours, Masters and PhD students. An experienced writing workshop facilitator, Lynda has also presented workshops for community and writing groups in Australia and Canada. She is the President and Chair of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs, on the board of the Northern Rivers Writers Centre and has been published in a variety of academic and creative publications.

Sara Hughes

Sara Hughes earned a PhD in English from Georgia State University in 2014. Her poems have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, the 2015 Best of the Net Anthology, and the 2015 Independent Best American Poetry Award. She has published in dozens of journals, including *Rattle*, *Reed*, *Rosebud*, *TAB*, *Atlanta Review*, *Review Americana*, *Emrys*, and *Atticus Review*, among others. Sara has also received writing fellowships from I-Park Foundation and The Hambidge Center for Creative Arts and Sciences. She teaches literature and writing at Middle Georgia State University in Macon, Georgia.

Luke Johnson

Luke Johnson's writing has appeared in such places as *Overland*, *HEAT*, *Island*, *Mascara Literary Review* and *TEXT*. His debut novella, *Ringbark*, set in the shearing sheds of country NSW, was published by Going Down Swinging in 2015.

Allan Lake

Allan Lake has lived in many places including: Ile a la Crosse, Saskatchewan; Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia; Ibiza, Spain; and Launceston, Tasmania. His latest collection of poems, *Sand in the Sole*, was launched at the Tas Poetry Fest in 2014.

Wes Lee

Wes Lee lives in Wellington, New Zealand. She spent a substantial part of her life living on a farm in Northland. She was the 2010 recipient of The BNZ Katherine Mansfield Literary Award, and has won a number of awards for her writing, including The Short Fiction Prize (University of Plymouth Press), and The Bronwyn Tate Memorial Award in New Zealand. Her poems have won prizes in *The London Magazine's* Poetry Competition, The Troubadour Poetry Prize, The Essex Poetry Prize, The New Zealand Society of Authors Poetry Competition, The Café Writers Poetry Prize, and have appeared in magazines including *Poetry London*, *Magma*, *Riptide*, *Going Down Swinging*, *The London Magazine*, *Cordite*, *Landfall* and *Westerly*.

Douglas Luman

Douglas Luman is Book Reviews Editor for the *Found Poetry Review*, Editor of *So to Speak*, Assistant Poetry Editor of *Phoebe*, and Art Director of Stillhouse Press. He can likely be found asleep in a library in Northern Virginia.

Cheryl McGarron

Cheryl McGarron is a Noosa-based writer.

Pam Miller

Pam Miller lives and writes on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland.

JB Mulligan

JB Mulligan has had poems and stories published in several hundred magazines over the past 40 years, also two chapbooks – *The Stations of the Cross* and *THIS WAY TO THE EGRESS* – and two e-books, *The City Of Now And Then*, and *A Book of Psalms*. He has appeared in several anthologies, including: *Inside/Out: A Gathering Of Poets*; *The Irreal Reader* (Cafe Irreal); and multiple volumes of *Reflections on a Blue Planet*.

Christopher Mulrooney

Christopher Mulrooney, 9 June 1956 – 23 July 2015. Mulrooney, esteemed Los Angeles poet, translator and writer of art and film critique, died 23 July 2015. His publications include *toy balloons* (Another New Calligraphy), *alarm* (Shirt Pocket Press), *Rimbaud* (Finishing Line Press), *supergrooviness* (Lost Angelene), and *Buson orders leggings* (Dink Press).

Nollie Nahrung

Nollie Nahrung lives in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales and is a PhD candidate in the School of Arts and Social Sciences at Southern Cross University. Her digital collage works remediate and remix images and written text taken from a ten-volume set of *The Children's Encyclopedia* (circa 1950). Nollie is a university medallist and her publications are available from <https://scu-au.academia.edu/NolJoy>.

Christina M. Rau

Christina M. Rau is the author of the poetry chapbooks *WakeBreatheMove* (Finishing Line Press, 2015) and *For The Girls, I* (Dancing Girl Press, 2014). Founder of Poets In Nassau, a reading circuit on Long Island, NY, her poetry has appeared on gallery walls in The Ekphrastic Poster Show, on car magnets for The Living Poetry Project, and most recently in the journals *Flapperhouse* and *Yes, Poetry* (as the featured Poet of the Month). In her non-writing life, she practices yoga occasionally and line dances on other occasions. Find her links on <http://alifeofwe.blogspot.com>.

Rachel Robertson

Dr Rachel Robertson is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Communications and Cultural Studies at Curtin University, WA. She is author of the memoir *Reaching One Thousand* (Black Inc, 2012) and editor of *Purple Prose* (Fremantle Press, 2015). Her academic interests include creative writing pedagogy, life writing, critical disability studies and Australian literature.

Sanjeev Sethi

The recently released, *This summer and that summer*, (Bloomsbury) is Sanjeev Sethi's third book of poems. His other volumes are *Nine Summers Later* and *Suddenly For Someone*. He has, at various phases of his career, written for newspapers, magazines, and journals. He has produced radio and television programs. His poems have found a home in *The London Magazine*, *The Fortnightly Review*, *Allegro Poetry Magazine*, *Solstice Literary Magazine*, *Off the Coast Literary Journal*, *Synesthesia Literary Journal*, *Oddball Magazine*, *Hamilton Stone Review*, *Dead Snakes*, *Literary Orphans*, *Crack the Spine Literary Magazine*, *The Peregrine Muse*, *Tuck Magazine*, *The Mind[less] Muse*, *Otoliths*, *Kitaab*, *Indian literature*, *Kavya Bharati*, *Muse India*, and elsewhere. Poems are forthcoming in *Sentinel Literary Quarterly*, *First Literary Review-East*. He lives in Mumbai, India.

Jessica Seymour

Jessica Seymour is an early-career researcher and freelance writer based in Darwin, Australia. She loves travelling, petting strangers' dogs on the train, and taking naps. One time, she went to the Shetland Isles and was nearly assaulted by a Shetland pony. She enjoys writing in all genres, and her creative work can be found in *Voiceworks Magazine*, *Needle in the Hay*, and *Gloom Cupboard*.

Sarah St Vincent Welch

Sarah St Vincent Welch is a Canberra based writer. She travels the divide between Canberra and Sydney to work on her Doctorate of Creative Arts at University of Technology, Sydney. Her practice-led research involves making and also examining representations of pregnancy and fertility in literary fiction. Writing women's bodies is core to her work, and she has received support in this from the Australia Council (with an Emerging artist grant) and from the Australian Society of Authors (with a mentorship). She explores writing and reading, place and time at sarahstvincentwelch.com She is part of a poemcentric venture, [Project 366](#), writing a poem every day of 2016, with a group of poets, artists and translators.

Rebecca Te'o

Rebecca Te'o is a lecturer in Journalism in the School of Arts and Communication within the Faculty of Business, Education, Law and Arts at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. She has previously worked as a journalist for APN News & Media, one of Australia's largest news publishers, and specialises in feature writing. Her research interests are in journalism and trauma; she has written about the impact of long-term exposure to conflict and trauma on journalists, and the problems associated with the myth of the hard-bitten journalist.

Deborah Wardle

Deborah Wardle lives in Central Victoria, in dry, box ironbark country. She has work published in *The Big Issue*, *Overland*, and *Palliative Care Australia*. She is a PhD student at RMIT University, exploring expressions of dissident voices in narrative fiction. She has worked in a smallgoods factory and has a deep affinity with horses. Her Masters thesis, through Melbourne University, examined the trope of the horse in Gillian Mears' novel, *Foal's Bread*.

Irene Waters

Irene Waters, a research higher degree candidate at Central Queensland University, has been published in the anthology, *Eavesdropping* (2012), and in *Idiom 23* (2013, 2014).

Libby Woodhouse

Libby Woodhouse is a senior radiographer with Breastscreen, and has creative and research interests in writing and women's health.

